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## **Searching for a Voice in Bongo-land: Bongo Flewa Music and the Global Imagination in Neoliberal Tanzania**

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***Searching for a Voice in Bongo-land:  
Bongo Fleva Music and the Global Imagination in  
Neoliberal Tanzania***

*Fiona Balestrieri*

*Honors Thesis in Music*

*April 15, 2013*

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# ***Part I: Dar es Salaam, Bongo-city***

## ***Waking up in Dar es Salaam***

On September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012 at six in the morning I woke up in a dorm room at the University of Dar es Salaam to sounds that would soon be familiar, long-distance morning greetings yelled from building to building—“*Habari za asubuhi!!?*” “*Nzuri, je wewe?!?*” (“How is your morning!!?” “Good, how about you?!?”)—radios tuning into news and music, and *dada*<sup>1</sup> (“sister”) Rose unabashedly belting the latest East African gospel hits. This morning a popular selection from Uganda filled the hallway with Swahili praise to the rhythm of her scrubbing—“*Wema wa mungu amenizunguka!!*” (“The goodness of God surrounds me!!”). My desire to sleep overruled by the early-rising majority, I peeled away my mosquito net, shook off my dreams and began to contemplate the task at hand. I was in the largest city in the East African country, Tanzania, to get “involved” in the local *Bongo Fleva*<sup>2</sup> music scene. The city of Dar es Salaam is, after all, the birthplace of the (originally) American hip-hop-inspired genre of Tanzanian popular music that emerged in the early 90s and has been producing artists, songs, and controversy ever since.

I first heard Bongo Fleva not in Tanzania, but in neighboring Kenya where I spent two months teaching English and Music at a primary school in Mombasa in 2010. Catchy Swahili-language pop songs with electronic Hip Hop and R&B beats that I later identified as Tanzanian Bongo Fleva hits occupied a prominent place in the playlists at local clubs and in

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<sup>1</sup> Dada (lit. “sister”) is used to refer to all young, unmarried women but it is also a general term used by students at the University of Dar es Salaam to refer to the young women who clean the dorms and do laundry for a small fee.

<sup>2</sup> “Bongo Fleva” is also spelled “Bongo Flava,” “Bongo Flavor,” and “Bongo Flavour.” I use the spelling that best represents the pronunciation of the term.

*matatus*<sup>3</sup> around Mombasa during my first experience living in Africa. Upon returning to the United States I actively listened to new Bongo Flewa hits of 2011 and 2012 as they were posted to YouTube and various music downloading sites<sup>4</sup> that connect East African diasporic DJs and music junkies to the “homeland.” As I connected to these transnational flows of Bongo Flewa in East Africa and America, I began to imagine the place and people who produced them: Tanzania and Tanzanians. Now I was in the real Tanzania and confronted with a diverse soundscape that complicated my one-genre soundtrack. While I was sitting at my computer dreaming of Tanzania to the sounds of Bongo Flewa, Dar es Salaam residents were producing and listening to all kinds of music that hadn’t factored into my imagination.



*Beautiful Dar es Salaam (from the Arabic dar as-salaam “House of peace”) pictured from the roof of a building in city-center “Posta” where Tanzanian rapper G-SOLO and I filmed sequences for a Bongo Flewa music video.*

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<sup>3</sup> Matatus are privately owned mini-buses that are popular choices for affordable intra- and even inter-city public transportation. In Tanzania, similar buses are called *Daladalas*.

<sup>4</sup> See [soundcloud.com](https://soundcloud.com) and [supremacysounds.com](https://supremacysounds.com)

## ***Bongo Fleva***

The name of the musical style, *Bongo Fleva*, pays homage to the city of Dar es Salaam, popularly known as *Bongo* (from the Swahili *ubongo* ‘brains’ or ‘wisdom’) and suggests that its music is the essential “flavor” of the city. Perhaps in an attempt to unify the nation under the genre, Tanzanians increasingly use the term *bongo* or *bongoland* to refer to the entire country. My ears, however, detected many other *flevas* in the air of *Bongo* city each day. Radios and Tanzanian friends sang out a dizzying variety of musics spanning wide geographical and temporal ranges. The continued radio play of Congolese Soukos from the 40s and on, American country music from the 60s, American Hip Hop and R&B hits from the 80s to the present, Soukos-inspired East African rumba from the 70s, Jamaican Reggae and Dancehall from the 80s to the present, and, most importantly to the emergence of *Bongo Fleva*, American Hip Hop and R&B from the 90s to the 2010s sounded the historical depth of Tanzania’s engagement with transnational musics. In his study of Tanzanian popular music, Alex Perullo traces this transnational engagement back even further to musics that are no longer part of popular memory.

Consumption of music in recorded form dates to the 1920s when gramophones first started appearing in the region with regularity. Even the trading of musical instruments in eastern Africa, a process that no doubt has a long history even among pre-colonial populations, illustrates transitions in people’s relationships with musical production and consumption. This long history of global engagement brings regular and consistent attention to alternative sounds, ideas, and experiences that become intertwined within everyday practices of people’s lives. (Perullo 2011: 342)

Without ignoring this long-term “global”<sup>5</sup> engagement, however, it seems clear that the current historical moment is experienced in ways that relegate some styles to the imagined past, the “oldies” station if you will, and others to the contemporary world. Recent transnational influxes of popular music through which Tanzanians “keep up with the times” include contemporary Nigerian pop which is typified by the iconic duo “P-Square,” international dance-club hits, contemporary American popular music, and gospel music from America and Africa. The more nationally bounded genres of *Taarab* (sung Swahili poetry), *Ngoma* (the official “traditional” music/dance of Tanzania), *Mchiriku* (pre-Bongo Fleva popular urban music of the 70s) *Muziki wa Kwaya* (Tanzanian choir music), *Muziki wa Injili* (Tanzanian gospel music), and the stylistically overlapping genres of Bongo Fleva, reggae, ragga (electronic reggae, similar to Dancehall), and Swahili/Tanzanian/Maasai Hip Hop (once grouped in with Bongo Fleva) all live a relatively healthy social life in contemporary Tanzania. Their different origins and historical development, however, give each genre a particular role to play in the imaginative production of Tanzanian identities.

In this study I suggest that, as a music that emerged directly out of the material culture and social climate introduced by structural adjustment, Bongo Fleva is a rich site for the study of *neoliberal* forms of social identity in Tanzania. The globally influential philosophy of neoliberalism promotes material economic policies such as liberalization, free trade, deregulation, and privatization as the best or “most efficient” means to global growth. In the Tanzanian context, we see neoliberal “structural adjustment reforms”

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<sup>5</sup> Perullo uses this term differently than I do. While I use “global” to denote the global imagination implied in contemporary discourse, Perullo seems to be using it to mean something closer to “transnational.” I take transnational to mean connecting places and peoples across national boundaries in contrast to “global” which implies an *awareness* of a global totality that is not necessarily substantiated in literal exchanges or connections.

introduced by international lenders in the 80s and 90s in contradistinction to a nationalist “African socialism” that was established with Tanzanian independence in the early 1960s. The struggle within Bongo Flewa to retain the expression of Tanzanian identity while sonically transcending the national by incorporating transnational musical styles and voices is emblematic of the broader contradictions of the neoliberal moment that I illustrate in this paper.

Several scholars have written about Bongo Flewa since its emergence in the early 1990s with an eye toward its social significance (see Gesthuizen and Haas 1998, Perullo, Stroeken 2005). Gesthuizen and Haas’s 1998 article “Ndani ya Bongo: Kiswahili rap Keeping it Real,” one of the first scholarly works to document the Bongo Flewa music scene, seems to closely follow what Amanda Weidman has identified as “academia’s fetishization of the voice” by foregrounding the semantic content of artists’ speaking and singing voices in social analysis. Many later authors also use transcribed and translated interviews and song lyrics to analyze *what* people say rather than *how* they say it, portraying language choice as a pragmatic means of communicating denotative content and obscuring its symbolic potential. Stroeken, for example, identifies Swahili as a practical means of getting out the semantic messages of Hip Hop rather than an end in itself when he writes, “Bongo Flava has contributed to expanding it [free expression] for society at large, and this by *capitalizing* on the national language of Swahili and on the fairly democratic reach of radio in Africa [italics mine]” (Stroeken 2005: 492). In a collection on music and competition in East Africa, co-authors Gesthuizen and Haas tell us, “Rap artists in Tanzania who are trying to copy the *content* of American rap are criticized” (Gesthuizen 2000: 5). While the lyrical content of Bongo Flewa is certainly important, I argue that language choice and vocal style,

the material forms rather than the denotative content of Bongo Flewa voices, may also be critical means of performing the authenticity identified as “keeping it real.” Alex Perullo’s recent work on Bongo Flewa follows the trend of foregrounding discursive content gleaned from interviews and lyrics but his 2003 article in the edited volume *Global Pop, Local Language* focuses specifically on the politics of language choice in Bongo Flewa. He concludes that artists “rely on their knowledge of the historical, commercial, and political dimensions of their social identities, using language to position themselves within the national and international hip hop culture” (Perullo 2003: 33). This statement fails to provide a holistic framework to explain musico-linguistic positioning within Bongo Flewa and his analysis divides commercial interests from other interests in a potentially problematic way. Further, this analysis, like the others mentioned, may overstate the agency of artists in processes of linguistic positioning. I instead argue that the historical, commercial, and political motives of artists are all dimensions of the same conflicted aspiration to global inclusivity. Furthermore, these aspirations are both limited and enabled by multiple “politics of voice” that essentially link certain ways of singing/rapping/speaking to certain national and transnational imagined communities.

It is important to note that, in spite of attempts to extend Bongo Flewa music and mentality to the nation through TV and radio networks, travelling music festivals, and the bongo-land label, this music is not universally popular among my Tanzanian friends. Prompted by my inquisitive enthusiasm, many of my fellow students at the university demonstrated a great knowledge of *Bongo Flewa* artists and songs but when I asked if I could have some of their musical collections they somewhat proudly confessed that they only had foreign (mainly American, Jamaican, and Nigerian) pop music saved on their

computers. Many of my other friends, notably those who didn't have computers, mourned the loss of the "original" Bongo Flewa, saying they only liked the old artists who have *ujumbe*. The Swahili word *ujumbe* literally translates to "message" but carries heavy discursive weight in the Tanzanian moralizing of music that validates "socially conscious" lyrics that *pata ujumbe* ('carry a message'). Still others abandoned Bongo Flewa for popular gospel music that, with its overt devotion to God and/or Jesus, is immune to the moral suspicion that sometimes surrounds the non-religious content of pop music in Tanzania. For example, when I started humming the tune to popular Bongo Flewa song "Nivute Kwako" in his presence, my gospel music-loving friend Jomo chuckled and said something to the effect of "So you like those silly songs?" Before I could get involved in *Bongo Flewa*, I had to find it in this web of sounds and opinions, so I went on a walk around campus.

### ***Back in Dar es Salaam: Hip Hop is dead?***

I found Bongo Flewa in an abandoned, graffiti-smothered building across from the Fine and Performing Arts building at the University of Dar es Salaam. Sandwiched in between scribbled Swahili and English wisdom<sup>6</sup> and countless Hip Hop and otherwise-inspired signatures<sup>7</sup> someone, perhaps a student at the University of Dar es Salaam, perhaps one of the *wezi* ("thieves," specifically those who carry machetes) who were rumored to live in the adjacent *pori* ("wilderness") drew a picture of a person wearing headphones in front of a microphone, evoking the nearly globally salient image of an artist

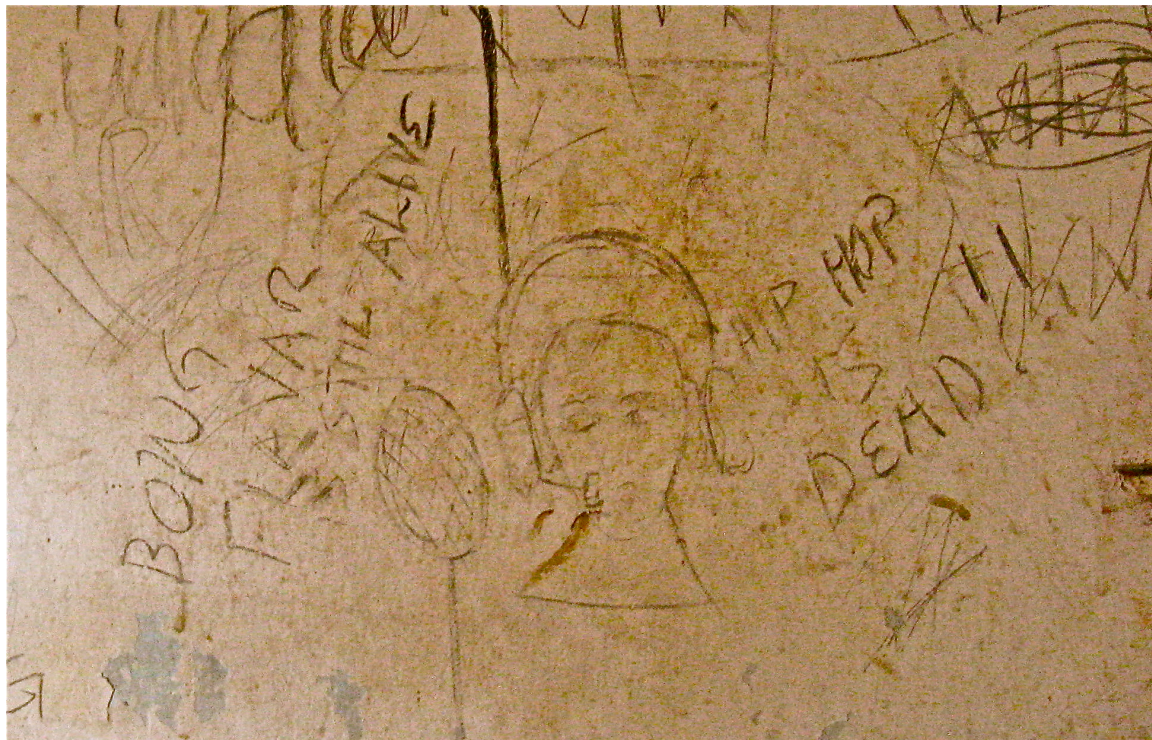
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<sup>6</sup> Some phrases inscribed on the wall included, "*kuoga si usafi, kama kuoga ni usafi taalo isingechafuka* ('Showering is not cleanliness, if showering is cleanliness the towel wouldn't get dirty')" and "Money is everything but without God is not thing [nothing]!!"

<sup>7</sup> These graffiti signatures included "luda" (referencing American hip-hop artist Ludacris), "champ boy," "eddopizzo ally pizzo" (likely referencing Kenyan rapper Octopizzo), and "*mharakati* ('activist')"



in a recording studio. The surrounding words, likely inspired by American Hip Hop artist Nas's controversial 2006 album title "Hip Hop is dead," drew the image into local discourse; *BONG FLAVAR IS STTIL ALIVE, HIP HOP IS DEAD!!* ('Bongo Fleva is still alive, Hip Hop is dead!!').



I laughed at the seeming contradiction of the statement "Hip Hop is dead" in a room plastered with references to the American rapper Ludacris and snapped a picture of what I took to be an amusing contradiction. When I looked back at the image later in the day, however, I realized the joke was on me; even though the words were written in English instead of the vernacular Swahili I had no idea what they *meant*. Why is Bongo Fleva alive when its inspiration, Hip Hop, is dead? Isn't Bongo Fleva, often glossed as "Swahili Hip Hop" due to its musical style, a type of Hip Hop? If that is the case, how can Hip Hop be dead if it lives on in Bongo Fleva? Why did the author write this statement in English, rather than the lingua franca of the region, Swahili? Who is he/she talking to? What does it mean to

say that a music genre is dead? Read with these questions in mind, a wall of graffiti writing became a complex index of attitudes toward music that characteristically drew relationships between the “local” (Bongo Fleva, Swahili) and the “global” (Hip Hop, the English language). The globally-inflected style of Tanzanian popular music raises similar questions as it generously samples international musical idioms—rap styles, R&B singing styles, the list goes on—and language—English—all the while asserting its singular musical identity in a place-specific genre label. Shifting Bongo Fleva ideologies of “authenticity” and “realness” alternately deconstruct and reconstruct Tanzanian “difference” from global others, revealing the complex and sometimes contradictory ways in which Dar es Salaam residents understand their place in a global community imagined in sound.

### ***Ethnographic Frames of Analysis***

This thesis draws upon several specific encounters with Bongo Fleva music that emerged from personal and musical relationships. Ironically, it was not my ability to blend in but instead my visible and audible “foreign-ness” that gave me access to Bongo Fleva social worlds. I served, in and of myself, as a means for my Tanzanian friends to ground their global imaginations in a personal relationship. The “fieldwork hook”<sup>8</sup> that gained me entrance to Bongo Fleva social worlds was simply a demonstrated interest to be included. While my ethnographic experience was rich, I choose only two specific contexts for analysis in this paper. I highlight these scenarios for several reasons, first because they center on the music genre in question, Bongo Fleva, second because conscious discourse about voice came into play, and third because the people involved in each have critically different social

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<sup>8</sup> Rasmussen, Anne K. forthcoming “Language as Power, Performance as Intention: Women's Islam in Indonesia.” In *Theorizing Sound Writing* Edited by Deborah Kapchan, University of Chicago Press.

perspectives. The first context involved the reception of Bongo Flewa by a group of young middle-class women while the second involved the production of Bongo Flewa music by a group of young lower-class men.

The first encounter that I analyze took place right in my dorm room at the University of Dar es Salaam. My roommate Maureen, an impeccably stylish communications major, and her girlfriends' most enthusiastic engagement with the Bongo Flewa genre was their devotion to "Bongo Star Search,"<sup>9</sup> an American-Idol-style TV show that awards a prize to the "best" Bongo Flewa singer in Tanzania by text-message popular vote. Maureen and her girlfriends closely followed the auditions processes and when the finale aired the four girls crowded excitedly around the TV that Maureen had bought at the beginning of the semester to satisfy her self-declared addiction to soap operas, talk shows, and music videos. I joined the excitement, picked my favorite singer, and participated as best I could in the part-English part-Swahili commentary over who the next Bongo star should be. In this context, I highlight the importance of televisual media in the production of Tanzanian identities alongside the ideologies of voice embedded in media reception.

The second ethnographic context I describe and analyze is my month-long experience recording a song and filming a music video aimed for the Bongo Flewa market with veteran rapper G-SOLO (Gerard Saying On Lyrics Only). The rapper sought me out after my friend Kataruga, a graduate of the University of Dar es Salaam's music program and self-described "Bongo Fusion" artist, met and chatted with him at a Reggae concert. G-

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<sup>9</sup> The Facebook website for the show describes it as follows, "Bongo Star Search is an interactive musical reality TV show. The show premiered on ITV in 2006, since then the program has been elevated to the status as one of the most favoured TV programs in Tanzania. The show presents a unique platform to the youths of Tanzania whose talent lacks exposure or the funds to support and advance it. So far Bongo Star Search had celebrated Five (5) successful seasons."

SOLO later told me that he was explaining his frustration with female Tanzanian singers whose voices “all sound the same” when Kataruga suggested he work with me, a young female American singer with a nice voice. He jumped at the opportunity and immediately got in touch with me. Our musical collaboration was a rushed but fascinating introduction to the aesthetic and practical production of Bongo Fleva music and the politics of incorporating “foreign” sounds, such as my voice, into the production of Bongo Fleva music. This experience was also my first foray into the emergent field of “studio studies” pioneered by ethnomusicologists such as Louise Meintjes and Christopher Scales.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout all of my interactions I perceived the same conflicted fantasy that was inscribed on the wall, on the one hand aspirations to global inclusivity and on the other Tanzanians’ lived experiences of difference and marginality made more complex by increasing socio-economic disparity among *wananchi* (‘citizens’). Dialectics of inclusion and exclusion coursed through discussions of Bongo Fleva sometimes glorifying and sometimes demonizing culturally enacted aspirations to global inclusivity as “inauthentic.” For example, my informants debated whether artists should cater to a Tanzanian or an international market and aesthetic, whether rappers and singers used too much or too little English in their music, or how my (female, American, white?) voice could fit legitimately into the genre. These assertions of the genre’s place in a global imaginary were coupled with morally charged anxieties over a perceived loss of the authenticity and social purpose of a Tanzania located in the post-independence nationalist “return to African socialism.” Was Bongo Fleva losing its *ujumbe* as it became more commercially successful? Should

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<sup>10</sup> Louis Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio*. (Durham and London:Duke University Press, 2003). Christopher A. Scales. *Recording Culture: Powwow Music and the Aboriginal Recording Industry on the Northern Plains* (Durham and London:Duke University Press, 2012).

socially conscious artists abandon the term and instead label their genre “Hip Hop” to avoid association with a Bongo Fleva that had become commercialized pop music? At the heart of all of these concerns was a larger question: is success in the internationally imposed neoliberal<sup>11</sup> economic climate of Tanzania compatible with a Tanzanian identity predicated on socialist resistance to “exploitation”? These questions emerge from a productive tension between global imaginations and the local limitations that painfully reveal the false promises of neoliberal global inclusivity. In my thesis, I focus specifically on one axis of international inclusion/exclusion that is creatively engaged in the performance of Bongo Fleva, fluency in the *lugha ya kimataifa* (‘international language’) English.

As I built relationships with people—played music with them, watched music videos, concerts, and TV shows with them, learned Swahili from them—and tried to understand *their* understandings of our shared experiences, I came to read the intention of the graffiti I had photographed in relation to the broader theme of performing boundaries. When a young Dar es Salaam resident, the likely author of the graffiti in question, says “Bongo Fleva is still alive, Hip Hop is dead!!” he asserts a definitive border between *Bongo Fleva* and the American-born but globally performed genre of Hip Hop. Moreover, the scribe contends that *Bongo Fleva* is somehow more relevant to the present moment, more “alive” than Hip Hop that is irrelevant, outdated, “dead.” This claim seems to invert hierarchical aspirations to the “global” genre of hip-hop in favor of a local brand of cultural expression that is firmly located in the present. Yet his invocation of English and reference to American rapper Nas seems to imply entanglement with what might be called “global” elements. When we take a

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<sup>11</sup> Neoliberalism encompasses both material economic policies that promote economic liberalization, free trade, deregulation, and privatization as well as the belief that these economic policies are the best or “most efficient” means to global development and growth.

step back and look at the rest of the wall we are faced with graffiti that blatantly blurs the borders between “Tanzanian” and “global” Hip Hop practices. For example, whoever wrote “Hey! Whazaap” and “Luda [a reference to the American rapper Ludacris] I was born to safer [suffer]” directly invokes the very global, hip-hop loving, English-speaking world that the first author we considered deliberately ousts from his definition of Tanzanian popular culture as represented by *Bongo Flewa* music. Taken together, all of these socio-musical statements consciously draw a *locally produced* music into a relationship with the global imaginary, expressing and enacting various authors’ social selves in imagined global terms. The graffiti artists just like Bongo Flewa recording artists *address* the global even in their attempts to assert difference from it. Much as I had imagined Tanzania through the sounds of *Bongo Flewa* before arriving, the Tanzanians I met actively imagined other places and accordingly reimagined their own localities in sounds brought to East Africa with the media flows of the neoliberal era. Their attempts to police the boundaries of these “foreign-born” cultural elements in relation to “Tanzanian” cultural elements and on the other hand to determine whether “foreign” and “Tanzanian” are viable categories at all sonically and discursively negotiate a place in an imagined “global” community based at once on the ruptures of contemporary experience and the continuities of cultural memory.

Rather than simply laughing off the contradictions I experienced on a daily basis, in what follows I aim to understand the logics by which seemingly contradictory statements of social membership emerge and coexist in the popular culture of contemporary Tanzania. How can a statement such as “*BONG FLAVAR IS STTIL ALIVE, HIP HOP IS DEAD!!*” be read, spelling errors and all, as deeply meaningful? My ethnography, like my informants themselves, looks both forward to imagined futures and backward to imagined pasts in an

attempt to understand the present historical moment. The contradictions that emerge from these imaginative practices map onto individual subjectivities, the way people conceive of their social selves. How do Tanzanians claim “global” citizenship, predicated on participation in neoliberal forms of economic exchange, and “authentic” Tanzanian identity, located in the recent socialist past, in the same breath? My analysis complicates notions of historical rupture implied in modern/traditional dichotomies and neo-liberal development discourse and attempts to develop a model of cultural transformation that acknowledges the continuity in change as well as the change in continuity. With this goal in mind I ground the statistical realities of economic inequality in the historically emergent processes of identity formation that render them socially meaningful.

### ***Neoliberal Tanzania: National Identity in Global Perspective***

I use Bongo Fleva music culture to analyze the ways in which global/modern aspiration and cultural memory produce a mosaic of identity formations in contemporary Dar es Salaam. I follow anthropologist Brad Weiss’s approach to neoliberal popular culture by analyzing how Bongo Fleva is inextricably embedded in transnational networks of interaction and power. As Weiss writes:

The changes generally understood as neoliberal, with their emphases on consumption, thoroughgoing individualism, rapid circulation of goods, services, and persons, and the tying together of capital and the control of information in the creation of new financial instruments, have transformed the scale of social life around the world in ways that make terms like local and global highly problematic. (Weiss 2009: 16)

My analysis focuses specifically on the role of the musical *voice* in producing neoliberal subjectivities enabled and perhaps even demanded by the contemporary scale of social life. Rather than trying to parse the local and global elements of the music culture to describe a process of globalization or localization I contend that Bongo Fleva cannot be separated from the neoliberal “global” encounter. In Dar es Salaam the increasingly global scale of interconnection is closely linked to the English language as English-language media, English-medium NGOs and companies, and increasing numbers of English-speaking tourists flood Tanzanians’ social worlds. The close association between the English language and processes of global interconnection is clearly reflected in the often invoked opposition between English, the *lugha ya mataifa* (‘international language’) and Swahili, the *lugha ya taifa* (‘national language’). In contrast to English which is linked to a transnational community, Swahili (which is called *KiSwahili* in Swahili) vividly figures into Tanzanian imaginations of their national identity and its ideological legacy.

### ***Denaturalizing Tanzanian Voices***

My analysis of conflicted global fantasies centers on the ways language is meaningfully invoked in popular music to negotiate the lived intersection of a Swahili-flavored national identity with an English-flavored international identity. I interpret Bongo Fleva *voices* as conduits of sonic symbolism that reflexively express and produce new neoliberal socialities through particular ways of singing, rapping, and speaking as Tanzanians. In other words, I am interested in how the material qualities of musical utterances both reflect and produce self-consciously modern and global subjectivities in different ways. I argue that musical expression is key to the deconstruction and



reconstruction of essentialist categories linking voice to “authentic” Tanzanian identities. My use of this framework for thinking about voice is inspired by Amanda Weidman’s work on post-independence uses of voice in Indian classical music. She explains her approach;

Musicology and ethnomusicology, as disciplines that focus on sound, have generally treated the voice as a means or technology for producing music. I propose that we reverse this idea and examine music as a means or technology for producing the voice, in both a sonic and an ideological sense. In doing so, we perform the critical anthropological move of denaturalizing the voice and thus open up the study of musical sound and practice as *productive* of particular subjects or subject positions, rather than merely *reflective* of social structures or *expressive* of identities [italics in original]. (Weidman 2006: 13)

Using this framework to think about symbolic meaning of sound, I argue that the aesthetics of Bongo Fleva voices are *produced by* at the same time that they are *productive of* various globally situated subjectivities that index social identity. This ties into a larger argument that sound in general and the sound of the voice in particular can, as Weidman puts it, “create affective relationships to abstract concepts like ‘modernity’ or the nation” (Weidman 2008: 1) or indeed, in my analysis, the “world.” In the Tanzanian context, I ask what musical performances of English and Swahili *mean* in relation to abstract concepts of “national” and “international” identity rather than what a certain linguistic utterance means *in* English or Swahili.

## ***Living in Linguistic Inequality***

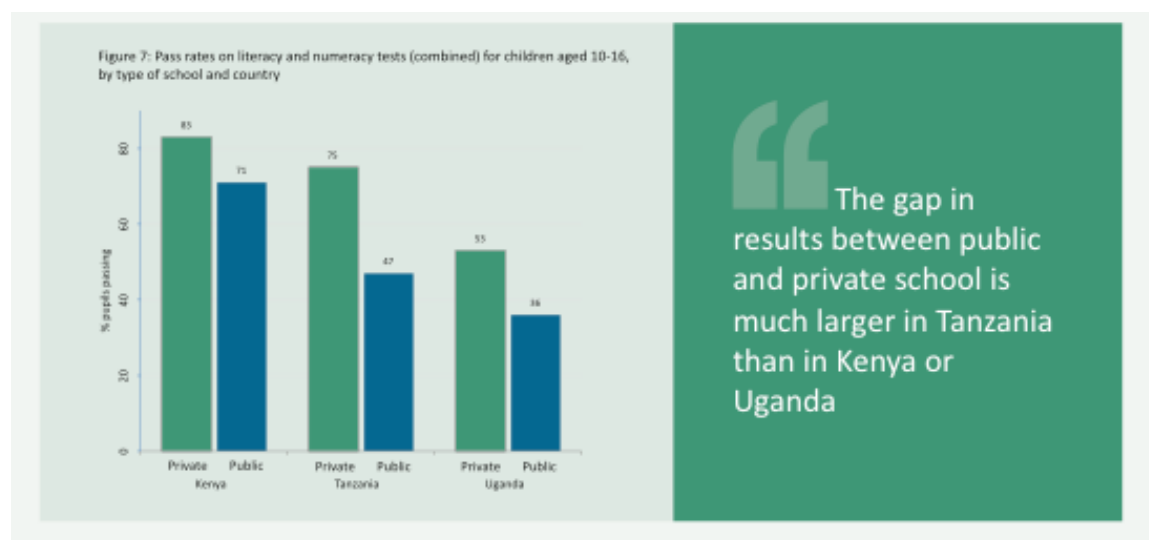
In contemporary Tanzania, where the effects of a highly successful nationalization of Swahili as the legitimate, African, socialist language meet an increasingly English-language-controlled neoliberal “world,” the affective experience of speaking, singing, or rapping in Swahili, English, or one of Tanzania’s many tribal languages engages with divisive identity and class politics. These ideologies of vocal authenticity are essentialist in that they link the authentic performance of certain languages to certain groups of people. For example, I had several conversations with lower-class Tanzanians who expressed anxieties that their attempts to speak English would be met with ridicule. One of my disabled English students, Rukia, even suggested that if she tried to speak English in public people would cut her off and say “Hujui (‘You don’t know!’)” because she’s visibly disabled. The politics of speaking tribal languages is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is interesting to note that the only tribal language commonly used in Tanzanian Bongo Flewa is KiMaasai<sup>12</sup>, the language of the Maasai ethnic group, which has been constituted as “traditional” throughout the colonial period and up to the present<sup>13</sup>. I instead focus on Swahili, the national language, and English, a language that is tied up in Tanzanian histories of colonialism and post-colonialism and is a contemporary force of social inequality. The failure of the public Tanzanian education system to provide effective English instruction in an era of increased global interconnection makes inequalities in English proficiency a powerful way that many Tanzanians experience their difference from both wealthier private-school-educated Tanzanians and global elites on a daily basis. In 2011 a report showed that only one in ten

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<sup>12</sup> For an interesting interpretation of ethnic “parody” of Maasai in Bongo Flewa see Katrina Daly Thompspon, “‘I am Maasai’: Interpreting ethnic parody in Bongo Flewa,” *Language in Society* 39 (2010): 493-520.

<sup>13</sup> Dorothy L. Hodgson, “‘Once Intrepid Warriors’: Modernity and the Production of Maasai Masculinities,” *Ethnology* 38.2 (Spring 1999): 121-150.

Standard Three pupils at public schools could read a basic, Standard Two level English story<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the literacy and numeracy test gap between students who attend private versus public schools in Tanzania is the highest in East Africa, sharpening a class divide based on educational opportunity that is tightly associated with English proficiency



*Taken from: Uwezo East Africa. (August 2012). Are our Children Learning? Literacy and Numeracy across East Africa. Nairobi, Kenya: Uwezo & Hivos/Twaweza, 2012.*

When I interviewed my ESL students and friends in Swahili about their language attitudes, all of them demonstrated a sharp awareness of this statistical link between money and English proficiency as well as strong desires to transcend socio-economic barriers by acquiring English. My two groups of informants, five Maasai men aged 22 through 47 from the Kiteto district of Manyara and five 28 to 35-year-old disabled women who have lived in Dar es Salaam most of their lives, fantasized about the social power of the English language. This global fantasy was clearly reflected in their answer to the question:

<sup>14</sup> Uwezo Tanzania. (2011). Are Our Children Learning? Uwezo District Ranking. Dar Es Salaam, Tanzania: Uwezo, TENMET & Hivos/Twaweza, 2011. For more information on the state of education in Tanzania visit <http://www.uwezo.net/>

*“kama ungekuwa unakijua Kiingereza vizuri, ungekitumiaje? Kujua kwako kiingereza kungesaidiaje maisha yako ya kila siku hapa Dar-es-Salaam?”*

Translation: If you knew how to speak English fluently, how would you use it? How would knowing English change your everyday life in Dar es Salaam?

In their responses my non-English-speaking interviewees waxed lyrical on the ways English could change not only their everyday local realities but also their global possibilities. My informants said English would enable them to find better work, read the instructions to operate imported machinery, understand the many English signs in the city, get American or European lovers, and travel the world. However, when asked what their biggest challenge to learning English was, socio-economic barriers came to the fore. Echoing the men’s comments, the women observed, *“hela ya kujifunza kiingereza hamna* (‘There is no money for studying English’). Neema said, in English, “No money, no education” and Rukia clarified *“Shule zipo...lakini pesa ya kusoma **hamna*** [all of the women said *hamna* together] (‘There are schools, but money for studying, **there is none.**<sup>15</sup>’)” (Sophia, Neema, and Rukia, personal communication, December 4, 2012). Even as my informants fantasized about the powers of the English language however they still defended the national language of Swahili in various ways. Only one of my interviewees said that he wanted his children’s first language to be English while the other nine said, without hesitation, they would choose the national language Swahili. Saitoti even worried that if people learned English in school they would forget Swahili, and indeed many people I spoke to throughout my fieldwork used neighboring Kenya, where more people speak

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<sup>15</sup> I opted for a more literal translation of the Swahili here to illuminate the way all of the women chimed in to say “there is none.” A smoother translation would read, “There are schools, but there is no money for studying.”

English but the Swahili is comical, “broken,” and “impolite,” as proof of the corrupting influence of English on Swahili. These conflicted fantasies about the English language—*if I could speak English my dreams would come true but I don’t have money to study it and Tanzanians should stick to the national language of Swahili anyway*—reveal the complex interactions between national authenticity, global fantasy, and linguistically-based exclusion from both local and global social arenas.

Yet even though inequalities in access to the international language exacerbate social division they also provide fertile ground for breeding what I will call performative “captures” of the language of power, English. In Dar es Salaam, for example, colorful performances of English by those who do not speak it surface on public transport vehicles and in popular music and speech. The fact that the slogans painted across the side of Bongo city’s *daladalas* (public transport vans, pictured below), *pikipikis* (motorcycle taxis), and *bajajis* (three-wheeled auto rickshaws) are often misspelled and generate seemingly unintended meanings is a powerful reminder of the widespread lack of English proficiency. The slogans nevertheless are one of the ways individuals performatively transcend the linguistic borders that signify their marginalization from “global” and, as neoliberal changes integrate Tanzanian localities into global markets, “local” dialogues.



*A representative picture of a Tanzanian daladala plastered with an English phrase that has little semantic meaning but in the charged linguistic climate of Tanzania is a potent expression of “English-ness” itself. Photo credit: <http://brianandmolly.wordpress.com/>*

Similar “captures” of English phrases by those who do not speak it and, contrastingly, exclusionary language performances by the elite Tanzanians who do, pervade the speaking, singing, and rapping voices of Bongo city. English is invoked in song lyrics, casual conversations,<sup>16</sup> popular Tanzanian TV and Radio shows, and even beauty pageants.<sup>17</sup> In this thesis I argue that, through performances of the English language, Tanzanians engage with the contradictions of the simultaneously postsocialist and neoliberal society and attempt to understand and transform their place in an imagined global society. These performances are structured in relation to a “politics of voice” (Weidman 2008: 139) that essentially links Swahili to a Tanzanian nationalist identity located in the first president, Nyerere’s socialist legacy and English to positions of global

<sup>16</sup> See Higgins, Christina (2007). Shifting tactics of intersubjectivity to align indexicalities: A case of joking around in Swahilinglish. *Language in Society*, Vol. 36, pp. 1-24

<sup>17</sup> See Billings, Sabrina (2009). Speaking beauties: Linguistic posturing, language inequality, and the construction of a Tanzanian beauty queen. *Language in Society*, Vol. 38, pp. 581-606

power and influence. I argue that what Brad Weiss calls lived neoliberal dialectics of inclusion and exclusion—desires toward inclusion in a global dialogue coupled with the exclusionary realities of global inequality—are articulated in the language aesthetics of sounding voices in Bongo Fleva music. “Foreign” ways of singing/rapping are incorporated into the Bongo Fleva canon by various logics of “authentic” appropriation through which Tanzanians alternately aspire to global power and critique its marginalizing force. The performative “capture” of “global sounds” in Tanzanian voices can be an attempt to erase difference from global others or, alternatively, an attempt to illustrate the disjuncture between local realities and global possibilities. Debates over the authenticity of “foreign” voices in Tanzanian popular music are, at their core, attempts to reconcile a Tanzanian identity linked to a socialist past with the pressing desires to benefit from a new neoliberal economic system; to cease being “exploited” by global others without yourself “exploiting” your Tanzanian *ndugu* (‘relatives’).

## ***Part II: Tanzanian History since Independence***

In this section, I trace the political, economic, and ideological history of Tanzania since independence with an eye toward how current processes of identity formation emerge out of historical discourses. I will point to the moralizing discourses of Nyerere's *Ujumaa na Kujitegemea* (unity and self-reliance) and how they clash with the “de-moralized” economic ideologies of neo-liberal policies even as Africans themselves continue to understand economic change, and accordingly econo-musical activities, in moral terms (Ferguson 2006: 69-88). Further I argue that the post-independence production of both Swahili-speaking voices and resistance to “exploitation” as essentially Tanzanian are powerful narratives that continue to structure projects of identity in the neoliberal moment.

### ***Moralizing Modernity in the Post-Independence Era***

The idea of “modernity” emerges in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment philosophies that linked individualism, rationality, and human progress to so-called “modern” societies in contrast to the rest of the world. The concept has structured the understanding of difference in various cross-cultural encounters from colonialism to post-colonial nation building to “modern-day” development projects. Rather than implying a literal historical moment, the “modern” moment, modernity as discourse divides up contemporaneous human populations in a phantasmal rendering of time. The discursive meaning of “modern” is indicative of a broader temporal synesthesia that allows us to



describe “fashionable” things as “contemporary” or “current” or “up to date” and gives meaning to countries’ “modernization processes” and individuals’ attempts to “keep up with the times.” In its most recent incarnation, discourse on modernity surfaces in aims to “develop” the “developing world” by furnishing the peoples of the world with “modern” amenities like clean water, food, electricity and so on. The aforementioned neoliberal philosophy suggests that free markets and democracy are the best and perhaps only means to bring the rest up to the “modern” standards of the West.

Tanzania has been on the low end of the “modernity scale” since colonialism and is now clearly labeled as one of the world’s “developing” countries. Unsurprisingly, claims to modernity have been a constant feature of political rhetoric in Tanzania since the 1880s when the Germans colonized East Africa. In 1961, after four decades as a German colony (1880-1919) and another four decades as a British protectorate (1919-1961), the territory that is now Tanzania became politically independent of foreign rule. *Baba wa taifa* (‘father of the nation’) Julius Nyerere, alongside other African nationalist leaders of the era, was charged with ushering in a newborn nation and with it a new era of modernity, complete with novel national and international subjectivities for the newly inaugurated *wananchi* (‘citizens’). The rhetoric of this new era of independence was, itself, a self-conscious construction of the “modern” nation in relation to the rest of the world at both an economic and ideological level.

When Tanzania became independent, President Julius Nyerere joined many African independence leaders in declaring his country socialist. This sweeping socialist trend in the post-independence African nations, which should not surprise us considering African independence movements directly targeted colonial economic exploitation, has been noted

by scholars and politicians alike. British Labour Party intellectual Fenner Brockway once commented in the era of African independence, “Nearly every politically alert African nationalist regards himself as a socialist ... Indeed, it is not too much to say that the most dynamic socialist movement in the world to-day is in Africa. It is the most comprehensively revolutionary continent” (cited in Pitcher 2006: 2). The specific goal of Nyerere’s Tanzanian nationalizing project as outlined in the Arusha Declaration of 1967 was a “return” to a romanticized African socialism reincarnated in nationalist political discourse as *ujamaa* (‘unity’). The nation’s economy was to be built on agriculture, the nationalization of key industries, and, perhaps most importantly, the new citizens’ loyalty and dedication to a nation-wide ideology of communalism. The state pursued aggressive social policies backed up by heavily moralized political rhetoric to promote *ujamaa*, a type of populist socialism based on familial bonds and responsibilities for fellow citizens. *Ujamaa* went hand in hand with *kujitegemea*, a national policy of economic self-reliance and political non-alignment that further enforced Tanzania’s difference from global others.

Symbolic notions of the new Tanzanian family were mapped onto citizens through the physical relocation of bodies as well as by regulations on how those bodies should speak and think. Government policies relocated post-primary students, soldiers, and teachers far from their hometowns to “mix up” the 120 ethnic groups in the country, forced resettlement into *ujamaa* villages, and “repatriated” the urban unemployed and underemployed to agrarian areas. The state instituted a single-language policy that formalized and employed Swahili as the national language of primary education and politics under the same state-sanctified goal of bringing all Tanzanians into the fold of a *modern* African socialism. The ideologies, political and cultural alike, of this modern

incarnation of African socialism brought long-standing local ideas about economic fairness into the modern, internationally oriented framework of a nation state that spoke in a uniform Swahili voice.

### ***The Original Wananchi ('Citizens'): Claiming Citizenship in Socialist Tanzania***

#### ***Economic Ideology***

The new nation state's rhetoric revoiced long-standing pan-ethnic moral idioms of parasitism and witchcraft into a national political discourse that demonized exploitation (*unyonyaji*) and exploiters (*wanyonyaji*) in general. James Brennan's historical analysis of popular understandings of *Ujamaa* in Dar es Salaam identifies this resistance to exploitation as one of the three ideal characteristics of *wananchi* ('citizens') in Tanzanian socialist political thought. The model citizen was "someone who was 'African'; someone who either worked as a labourer in urban areas or, preferably, as a farmer in rural areas; and someone who *not only refrained from but also fought exploitation* [italics mine]" (Brennan 2006: 391). In Tanzania's leading urban center, Dar es Salaam, poor Africans captured and reworked this national discourse to critique urban class differentiation and disparities of wealth and, in doing so, legitimated themselves as dutiful, exploitation-fighting *wananchi* who were themselves exploited (Brennan 2006: 413). Interestingly the first Tanzanian rappers used a strikingly similar legitimizing strategy a couple decades later when they fought against being labeled as exploitative *wahuni* ('hooligans') and *makepe* ('ticks'). The rappers coined the term *wasela* to describe themselves and elaborated in their raps lyrics the myriad ways *wasela* were exploited.

A colorful range of terms painted the urban populace in different moral shades, sorting out the exploited from the exploiters based primarily on the obviously unequal commercial exchanges that characterized urban life. *Kabwela* was the term used for the urban “everyman” while its discursive antonym *naizesheni* or *naizi* referred to “those urban Africans who, with relatively little effort, came to enjoy the lion’s share of the fruits of independence by inheriting the privileges of departing colonialists” (Brennan 2006: 410). Other morally stigmatized urban characters included the *mhuni* (‘hooligan’ or ‘thief’), *kupe* (‘tick’), *kabaila* (‘feudalist’, land-owning exploiter), *bwanayenye* (‘bourgeoisie person’), and *bepari* (‘merchant/capitalist’), all of whom were characterized by their unjust means of accumulation at the expense of others (Brennan 2006: 397). The policing of “exploitation” remains a potent idiom for social critique in a Tanzanian public culture that, as both Brad Weiss and Kelly Askew point out, has a long history of vigilance against social inequality (Weiss 2009: 28, Askew 2002) and these terms, along with newly created ones like *msela*, are still used to sort out the morally reprehensible “exploiters” from the “exploited.”

### *Ideologies of Voice*

The moralized economic imperatives of Tanzania’s post-independence identity politics were rendered effective by their tangible effects on people’s social lives. Especially important for my analysis is the way that membership in Tanzania’s Ujamaa community was contingent on learning the national language, Swahili. The Swahili language, imagined in spite of its heavy Arabic influences to be an essentially *African* language, was designated the authentic voice of the Tanzanian nation and all of its citizens. This essentialist linking of Tanzanian identities with Swahili-speaking voices was coupled with a highly effective

Swahili-language education that earned the first president the title *mwaliimu Nyerere* ('teacher Nyerere'). Conversely, a politics of enmity entailed a suspicion of the foreign that itself fed on essentialist language ideologies. The aforementioned term for one type of exploiter *bepari* ('merchant/capitalist') is derived from the Gujarati language spoken by many East African Indians (Brennan 2006: 397) linking the aesthetics of Gujarati to the un-Tanzanian. One nationalistic rant published in TANU's English-language newspaper explicitly spelled out the traitorous implications of not knowing Swahili;

Let it be said frankly that Wananchi ['citizens'] have tolerated enough of the abuses of these people [Indians]. Indeed, these are the same people who during our struggle for Uhuru ['freedom'] used to tell us 'weja wapi'. *These are the same people who have refused to learn our national language, Kiswahili* [italics mine]. These are... (Nationalist, 26 Nov. 1966, Quoted in Brennan 2006: 407)

The author goes on to describe other betrayals of the true Tanzanian citizens, linking all of these transgressions in a chain of parallel statements to this traitorous "refusal to learn Swahili." In his article, Brennan also cites a column in the popular press called *Miye* that further elaborated linguistically-coded "purge" categories of the nation state. In these fictional dialogues African *Miye* speaks in perfect Swahili to Indian shopkeeper *Mamujee*, who routinely says un-socialist things in *Kiswahili cha Kihindi* a pidgin Swahili spoken by many Indian East Africans. Once again we see a refusal to participate in nationalist *Ujamaa* social norms directly linked to a "refusal" to speak "proper" nationally standardized Swahili, the voice of the nation. This essential link between Swahili and Tanzanian national identity, like any essentialism, had its contradictions. English remained the language of higher

education throughout *Ujamaa* and, as we saw, English-language newspapers published volumes of nationalistic material. However the nationalist elaboration of Swahili as the authentic voice of the nation clearly played a huge role in creating Tanzanian subjectivities. The contradictions introduced by the continued use of the English language by elite Tanzanians have only intensified as neoliberal processes bring the power of English into sharp focus as a locus of social inequality, itself a target of socialist ideologies that sought to eradicate *wanyonyaji* ('exploiters'). As we saw in the statements of my English students, English is both a locus of opportunistic fantasy and feelings of exclusion. When the choice to speak English is interpreted as a refusal to speak the national language Swahili as when elite Tanzanians speak in rapid English to each other on public vans (*daladala*-s), the moralizing impulses inherited from *Ujamaa* could potentially cast them as "exploiters."

### ***The Continuity in Change: Wananchi Wanajitegemea*<sup>18</sup>**

In 1985, after *Ujamaa* policies proved an economic failure, the second president of Tanzania Ali Hassan Mwinyi set the nation on a course toward economic liberalization and the nation officially abandoned socialist ideology. "Structural adjustment" policies created by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank placed conditions on loans for developing countries that require recipients to privatize the economy, deregulate businesses, and reduce trade barriers. This economic structuring does not necessarily displace the social ideologies of socialism, however. As Pitcher and Askew argue of African post-socialist states in general and Tanzania in particular "socialism has left institutional,

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<sup>18</sup> Translation: 'The Citizens Support Themselves'

aesthetic, psychological and discursive legacies that African peoples and their governments have rejected, appropriated and reconfigured in order to reflect on the past and to negotiate the terrain of contemporary life” (Pitcher and Askew 2006: 11). What is it like, one wonders, when the material structures and national discourse that sustained you as member, albeit a marginalized urban member, of a socialist nation collapse? What happens when neo-liberal institutions and philosophies aim to dissolve your imagined *ujamaa* family and instead incentivize you to be an individualist consumer in a global market? How does a *kabwela*, the urban laborer everyman, aspire to the material prosperity that every man desires without engaging in the morally questionable economic activities of a capitalist *kupe* (‘tick’)? And how does a music that emerges out of this identity crisis reconcile the rich moral discourse of socialist Dar es Salaam with aspirations to commercial success? The contradictions play out in the complex musico-linguistic positioning that Tanzanians use to assume and authenticate new voices even as their identities remain entangled in a “politics of voice” that links Swahili to authentic national voice located in the socialist past.

Anthropologist Jennifer Cole offers useful insights into how the ideals of the past shape the neoliberal present. In her account of Malagasy young women’s coming of age in the neoliberal era urban space of Tamatave, Jennifer Cole argues that changes often understood as generational “ruptures” are, in fact, always fundamentally linked to the past. In her analysis she writes,

The urgency associated with acquiring money is closely connected to how monetization and commoditization have become intertwined with long-standing ideas about how people build themselves up through networks of

*fitiavana* and exchange, propelling them into the future in ways that are nevertheless connected to the past (Cole 2010: 69).

Just as the deep Malagasy social idioms of “*fitiavana* and exchange” continue to structure young people’s projects of economic success, long-standing Tanzanian ideas moralizing economic inequality, summarized in the Ujamaa-era idiom of policing “exploitation,” remain central to Tanzanians’ social identities as they seek success in a neoliberal market. Although these socialist ideals do not necessarily dictate people’s actions, they are certainly a source of social critique to be reckoned with, especially in an activity like popular music production which attempts to produce value by publically representing Tanzania in *popular* ways. The continued relevance of longstanding ideas regarding the policing of exploitation may explain the clear tendency of Bongo Flewa artists to lyrically declare themselves “exploited” using labels like *kabwela*, the Ujamaa era urban “everyman” or *msela*, the morally-respectable victim of exploitative neoliberal circumstances.

Cole’s analysis challenges us to consider that even as “new generations” engage in materially novel practices like rapping these activities may be informed by long-standing cultural logics inherited from their forebears. Thus even though rapper G-SOLO claims in his book title *Harakati za Bongo Flewa na Mapinduzi* (‘The Bongo Flewa Movement and Revolution’) that Bongo Flewa is a revolution and my friends Kataruga and Caside-Bwai subversively rejected the respectful greeting for elders “Shikamoo” because, they claimed, it was a relic of the slave trade, they have not simply “forgotten” their ideological inheritance in the throws of “generational revolution.” Perhaps the most obvious evidence of young people’s cultural memory is the frequency with which socialist ideologue Nyerere is resurrected in neoliberal Tanzanian popular music. For example when Bongo Flewa



pioneer II Proud raps “*Mi ni Nyerere wa rap* (‘I am the Nyerere of rap’)” (II Proud “*Moja Kwa Moja*” quoted in Gesthuizen 2000) or when Professor Jay raps and Stroeken paraphrases “Mzee Nyanduso, as Nyerere is known in street slang, had the soul (moyo, also ‘heart’) and the calling (mwito) of the artist” (Stroeken 2005: 505). To this day, fond memories of an imagined past presided over by *mwelimu* (‘teacher’) Nyerere structure not only imagined pasts but also future plans.

The remembrance of the first president of Tanzania is encouraged by both popular discourse and official government policy: Nyerere is the undisputed *mwelimu na baba la taifa* (teacher and father of the nation) and also the only president to have his portrait displayed, according to government policy, in public spaces and businesses since the 1995 elections (Askew 2002: 50). On October 14<sup>th</sup> of every year, the Tanzania nation takes part in a collective celebration of Nyerere’s life on the anniversary of his death. All of my Tanzanian friends took the opportunity to actively remember the ideologue’s legacy but they came to different conclusions about its relevance to their own lives. Maureen and I watched CloudsTV’s Nyerere Day programming for an hour and lamented the breakdown of his communalist vision in contemporary Tanzania. Maureen concluded that human nature simply could not support his idealism saying simply, “there’s no one like him.” Across the street Jomo and Micah, two twenty-year-old Maasai men, watched Nyerere’s speeches on Jomo’s computer and tried to share the brilliance of his political rhetoric with me in translation. We enjoyed a more optimistic celebration of the former president’s life, simply extolling his virtues in hopes that others might follow his example. These activities of remembrance are central to the way Tanzanians continue to imagine themselves as bearers of a communalist ideological legacy even as the economic processes of the

neoliberal era incentivize them to abandon his vision. As Tanzanians attempt to transform their “place in the world” through the performance of Bongo Flewa music, they must confront the ideological inheritance that characterizes their social world. While some Tanzanians may, like Maureen, dismiss his idealism by saying “there’s no one like him,” others may think that everyone should be “like him.”

### *The Moral Economy in the Face of Economic Change*

A few months into my stay in Dar es Salaam, I took my roommate, Maureen, and her two best friends out for a fancy birthday dinner at an Italian restaurant on the beach, a favorite hangout for wealthy expats and tourists. We enjoyed our dinner as the self-nick-named “three musketeers” and playfully joked with the Tanzanian waiter in Swahili about the ridiculously high price of the water. He chuckled but did not bring the price down for his Tanzanian sisters in spite of their playful haggling and generous use of the respectful familial form of address “uncle.” After dinner our conversation, which for the past three months had revolved around American movies, music, television, and fashion, which they often knew more about than I did, took an unexpected turn. Perhaps prompted by the spooky nighttime atmosphere, Maria, Rabia, and Maureen started talking about witches who are rumored to fly over the city by night on their broomsticks and whose existence, they claimed, was proven by the occasional naked “witches” found on the streets in the morning, casualties of a fall from the sky. They also spoke of the powerful witchdoctors with occult powers warning, when I asked if I could go see one, that I would have to go to the rural areas because in the city they were dangerous and untrustworthy. My favorite story was about a certain magic that people use to enchant money which then, when mixed with other money, can be used to spirit away all of the money with which it comes in contact. Maureen told me matter of factly “That’s why I never mix the change I’m given in my purse, especially if I don’t trust the person who gave it to me.”

Urban legends expressing moral anxiety over the dishonesty of urban dwellers and the illegitimate acquisition of capital are certainly not limited to Dar es Salaam, but they may be evidence of a particularly widespread and historically rooted Tanzanian impulse to moralize material exchange. Maureen, Rabia, and Maria's accounts of magical theft and urban trickery draw on a long history of magical morality tales in Dar es Salaam and indeed throughout Tanzania. For example, several scholars have analyzed the popular tale of the *mumaini* ('vampire'), a once widespread belief that prosperous non-Africans or their African employees extracted blood from their helpless Tanzanian neighbors at night to enhance their powers<sup>19</sup>. *Mumaini* stories are a strikingly literal interpretation of a broader moral outlook condemning excessive accumulation at the expense of others. Ralph Austen's study of witchcraft in Africa identifies this moral suspicion of consumption with "a community governed by norms of collective survival and believing in a zero-sum universe—that is, a world where all profit is gained at someone else's loss" (Austen 1993: 92). Austen further explains how capitalist accumulation, un-tempered by the norms of collective redistribution of wealth, becomes the target of moralizing stories of witchcraft; "the communal/zero-sum side of this equation is broadly consistent with African beliefs identifying capitalism and witchcraft as the dangerous appropriation of limited reproductive resources by selfish individuals" (Austen 1993: 92). While under Nyerere's African socialism witchcraft was devalued as superstitious and backward, *unyonyaji* ('exploitation' literally 'sucking/suckling') was a popular term of *ujamaa* rhetoric that expressed a similar moral economy predicated on the suspicion of capitalist accumulation. Visual representations of *unyonyaji* included political cartoons depicting (often Asian,

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<sup>19</sup> See footnote 15 in James Brennan "Blood Enemies: Exploitation and Urban Citizenship in the Nationalist Political Thought of Tanzania" (2006) for reading suggestions.

Indian, or European) exploiters sucking fluid from the bodies of Africans with straws, clearly expressing the moral censorship of literal and economic “vampires.” *Ujamaa* promised, among other things, to “cut the straws” of the exploiters.

Stories and legends of exploitation, which to this day remain serious topics of discussion from rural villages to the slums of Dar es Salaam to the dorm rooms at the University of Dar es Salaam, hint at a social world in which, as Ferguson describes it, “all of the world, even the natural, bears the traces of human agency” (Ferguson 2006: 74) and is moralized accordingly. Commenting on the processes of neoliberalization that are central to recent African experience, Ferguson notes the contradiction between what he identifies as a “*de-moralized*” economic logic of structural adjustment and Africans’ own insistent moralizing of the radical restructuring of their lives (Ferguson 2006: 69-88). He uses Nyerere’s brand of African socialism, the immediate predecessor of structural adjustment programs in Tanzania, as a canonical example of the unrelenting moral discourse that he associates with African social worlds in general. Ferguson finds that the political creed of Tanzania’s socialist party TANU (Tanzania African National Union) drew on central moral oppositions that, he claims, “would be familiar to any ethnographer of the region: selfishness versus sociality, sharing versus exploitation, benevolence versus malevolence” (Ferguson 2006: 76). As James Brennan’s analysis of popular political rhetoric in Dar es Salaam during *Ujamaa* suggests, these moral oppositions became deeply embedded in popular discourse, in part because they had roots in popular moral economies. My experience suggests that moralizing attempts to identify “exploiters” continue to bear on popular culture in post-socialist Tanzania. The use of the English language, along with

many other markers of socio-economic inequality, is an easy target for social critique at the same time that it is a source of fantasy.

### ***Making it Big in the Moral Economy: Bongo Flewa and Commercial Success***

Just as the processes of generational change are inevitably entangled in the ideas of the past, *muziki wa kizazi kipya* ('music of a new generation') as Bongo Flewa is often called (Thompson 2010: 495), continues to reference the discourse of the Ujamaa era. The recent Bongo Flewa song "Kabwela" for example points to the continued presence of the "urban everyman" originally identified in Ujamaa social categories in contrast to bourgeois exploiters (see page 24 of this paper). Rich Mavoko sweetly sings the all-too-common lament of being excluded from the "fruits" of the neoliberal economy;

*leo nimepata kesho nimekosa*

*Today I win tomorrow I lose*

*nachohifadhi maumivu tu*

*I just keep suffering*

*life ni ngumu bado inanichosha*

*Life is hard it still wears me down*

*nakula mbichi sili mbivu boo*

*I eat the sour I don't eat the sweet/ripe things*

*huwezi amini bado kabwela*

*You can't believe it, (I'm) still a kabwela*

*sina uhuru kama niko jela*

*I don't have freedom it's like I'm in jail*

*huwezi amini bado kabwela*

*You can't believe it, (I'm) still a kabwela*

*sina uhuru kama niko jela*

*I don't have freedom it's like I'm in jail*

*- Staminah ft. Rich Mavoko "Kabwela"*

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xx\\_UsX8k700&playnext=1&list=PL046E1B30B0A0E84C&feature=results\\_video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xx_UsX8k700&playnext=1&list=PL046E1B30B0A0E84C&feature=results_video)

While this invocation of an Ujamaa era idiom is one of many that reveal the continued relevance of Ujamaa sentiments in neoliberal Tanzania, the sonic contrast between “Kabwela” (Track 1<sup>20</sup>) and the nationalistic songs of the Ujamaa era (Track 2) remind us that things have changed in Tanzania. Staminah’s cutting rap verse, studded with skillfully rhymed English words like “cosmetics” and “magnetics,” and Rich Mavoko’s sweet R&B style singing style sound a global interconnectedness that was tightly controlled during the Ujamaa era. Yet the processes of appropriating and popularizing “foreign” sounds in Bongo Flewa remain embedded in a social world that scrutinizes the exploitative potential of asserting difference.

While the self-referential lyrics of the recent hit song “Kabwela” firmly place the singer in the “exploited” kabwela category, the first Tanzanian rappers had to fight against a popular tendency to place them in the urban exploiter category of *mhuni* (‘thief/hooligan’). Alex Perullo’s article “Hooligans and Heroes: Youth Identity and Hip-Hop in Dar es Salaam” chronicles this fight for social acceptance. He argues that youth completely reshaped their identities in a fully agentic process of creative self-fashioning. As he puts it, “youth have turned a foreign musical form into a critical medium of social empowerment whereby they are able to create a sense of community among urban youth, voice their ideas and opinions to a broad listening public, and alter conceptions of youth as hooligans” (Perullo 2005: 75). I argue for a more distributive view of agency. My rereading of Perullo’s argument denaturalizes the voice and places it in the social climate of a post-socialist Tanzania still marked by the moralizing discourse previously outlined. This reading more realistically distributes agency not only to pioneers of the “foreign” musical

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<sup>20</sup> There is a listening CD that accompanies this thesis.

form but also to the listening public who made their voices socially audible. When artists “create” popular media they are constrained by what will be accepted and relatable to their listeners. Looking back to the Ujamaa politics of voice that linked Swahili to a morally-vetted national identity, for example, we can understand why it was not the initial English-language Tanzanian rap music but the later Swahili-language rap that captured the national imagination and became popular outside a circle of elite Tanzanians (Perullo 2007: 261). While the practical utility of Swahili as a language that is widely understood in Tanzania is important, it is not the whole story in language choice in Bongo Fleva or indeed any “popular” music. In Tanzania for example, the widespread popularity of Congolese Soukos, which is sung in the Lingala language, debunks the idea that in order to gain popularity the lyrics must be linguistically accessible. Any performance of Bongo Fleva must engage with a Tanzanian “politics of voice” that suspects the authenticity of English “captures.”

The authentication of Hip-Hop- and English-inflected voices in post-socialist Tanzania, a process that Perullo describes as “localization,” is also a story of appropriation that sonically transcends the local. Perullo’s argument, that the foreign is appropriated and then “evolves” into a phenomenon of local significance/meaning, obscures the meaning of the original appropriation and implies that it has no global significance. Why were Tanzanian youth attracted to “foreign sounds” such as the rapping voice or, more recently, the R&B voice in the first place? And doesn’t the “localization” of “global” sounds also entail the “globalization” of the “local”? I argue that the popularization of rap music as Tanzanian popular music was also a meaningful process of “naturalizing” foreign vocal sounds, English, rap, and more recently R&B vocal style, as a part of a new “Tanzanian” voice. In my analysis, the shifting and sometimes contradictory politics of voice that

accompany this “naturalizing” process articulate a deeper contradiction of participation that emerges in neoliberal Tanzania.

In his account of global fantasy in the city of Arusha, Tanzania, Brad Weiss suggests that the apparent contradiction of combining a sense of difference or exclusion with a sense of inclusion or participation in a globalized world is in fact characteristic of neoliberal popular culture:

...for an increasing segment of the world’s population, participation in a transnational order of things carries with it a sense of their simultaneous exclusion from that transnational purview. Again, we see a characteristic contradiction of the current neoliberal moment articulated in its popular cultural practices (Weiss 2009: 175).

This problem of participation is directly relevant to the linguistic crafting of “authentic” Tanzanian voices. As Tanzanians assume the voices of global others by rapping or sampling English phrases, they challenge the sonic borders by which their difference is constructed. As these voices are made socially audible through their popularity, new relationships between the global and the local are actively imagined and debated in terms of the authenticity of certain voices. The story of how rap became Tanzanian, like the story of how the word *fleva* became a Swahili word, narrates the imaginative remaking of social subjectivities in a collective Tanzanian attempt to fully participate in the contemporary scale of social life which increasingly incorporates global flows of popular culture.



## ***Part III: Ethnography and the Analysis of Lived Experience***

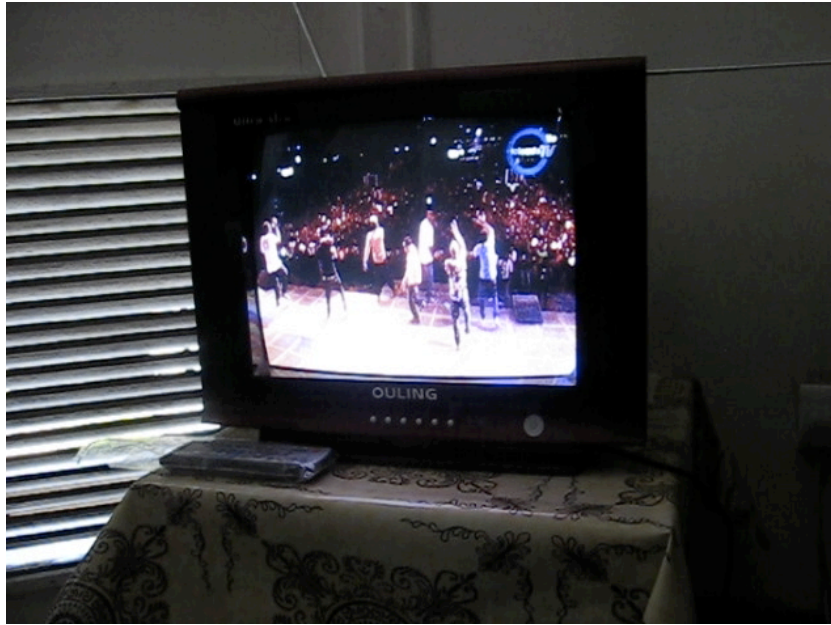
### ***Epiq Bongo Star Search***

Writing about television watching practices in Arusha, Tanzania in the late 90s and early 2000s, Brad Weiss identifies a host of imported English-dubbed soap operas as the most popular shows of the day. Rather than watching the few available Tanzanian produced shows, his informants closely followed the South African soaps *Egoli* and *Isidingo*, telenovelas (Spanish-language soap operas) such as *La Mujer de Mi Vida*, a Filipino soap *The Promise*, and the most popular television show in summer 1999, *Sunset Beach* (Weiss 2009: 176-177). In 2013, foreign soaps remained extremely popular. My roommate Maureen and I watched the Univisión produced telenovela *Soy tu Dueña* ('I am your owner') almost every day and slowly my impulse to laugh at the overdramatic English-dubbing gave way to a fascination with the shocking unplanned pregnancies, betrayals, and family secrets. Maureen's obsession with imported soap operas—American, Latin American, South African, and Chinese alike—and the American movies that circulated campus on flash drives stood alongside a healthy appreciation for Tanzanian-produced TV shows. For example, Maureen made sure to never miss *D'Wikend Chatshow* a music commentary show on CloudsTV hosted by three young middle-class Tanzanians chatting in half-Swahili, half-English, half

American slang about the latest American and Tanzanian hits. On their unofficial facebook page, the hosts describe the show as follows:

“D' WIKEND CHAT SHOW..Get all the Gossip and lattest music videos chatin only on the show..We go Hard,Nasty en Xclusive...!!! Every minute will shcok u..to want to knw abt the other...Get With the Show...!!!” (sic.)

While, as Weiss points out, watching foreign imported shows is itself a performance that has been enabling the imaginative remaking of social worlds in Tanzania for more than two decades, the more recent increase in Tanzanian-produced media in the past ten years presents specific problems and opportunities for the performance of Tanzanian identity. Questions of Tanzanian identity become embedded not only in the audience's participation but also in the *form and content* of the media itself. The question becomes not only how should the audience interact with the media, but how should Tanzania be *represented* in the media?



*Maureen's TV broadcasting the largest Bongo Flewa concert in Tanzania, Dar es Salaam's Serengeti Fiesta. If you look really really closely you might see me in the audience.*



*Directly across from the TV Maureen and I pull our best Hip Hop poses for a roommate picture.*

This question is particularly important because of the huge popularity of televisual media in various aspects of social life and performance, likely a result of televisual media

being considered the most “up to date.” In addition to the plethora of new Tanzanian-produced and Tanzania-centered shows on East Africa TV, ITV, and Clouds TV<sup>21</sup>, film crews were indispensable elements of the wedding and pre-wedding send-off parties that I attended. At all three of these events, a film crew roamed around filming the events of the wedding party, the social interactions of guests, the food preparations, and the bride and groom’s first meal and showing them live on several screens set up in the same room. The fact that the room was relatively small and the filming was far from a practical necessity forces us to consider the form of the media itself as crucial for the social performance. The Bongo Flewa music industry is no exception to this televisual fixation; as G-SOLO and many others told me, you *have* to make a music video if you want your song to be heard. As certain aspects of Tanzanian life are taken up into the self-consciously “modern” televisual medium and presented as television, debates over self-representation and authenticity are unavoidable.

Issues of authenticity in televisual representation of new Tanzanian identities directly parallel issues in musical representation. My first ethnographic focus, the hugely popular American-idol style competition show *Epiq Bongo Star Search*, brings together music and television in a sensational showcase of the voices of the nation. The attempt to, as the facebook show page terms it, “discover the best Tanzanian singer” is one attempt to answer the question that concerns this paper: what do Tanzanians want the “Tanzanian voice” to sound like? The charged nature of language choice that I have identified in this analysis was illuminated not only in the singers’ attempts to showcase their “best”

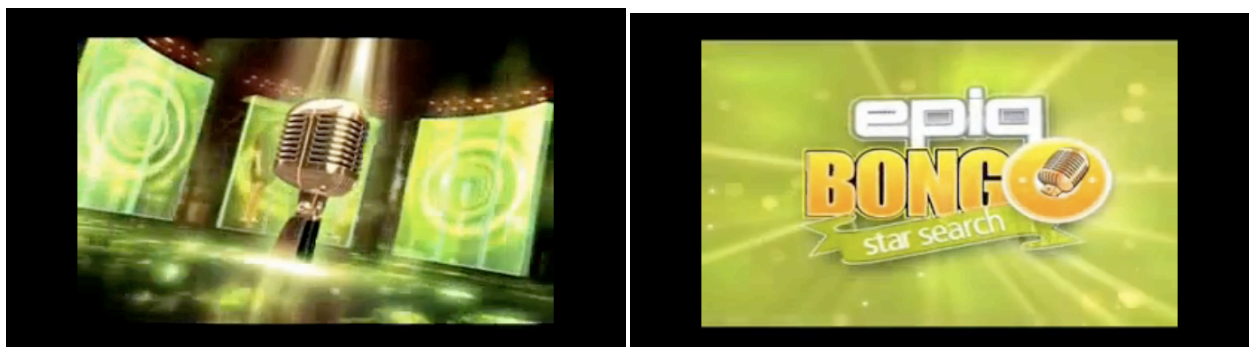
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<sup>21</sup> Popular Tanzanian-produced shows include Mkasi (<http://www.youtube.com/user/MkasiEATV>), Uswazi (<http://www.eatv.tv/shows/uswazi>), D’Wikend Chat Show (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/D-Wikend-Chat-Show/184428464988220>), and Epiq Bongo Star Search (<https://www.youtube.com/user/EpiqBongoStarSearch?feature=watch>) to name a few.

“Tanzanian” voices in a self-consciously modern, internationally oriented TV show, but also in the meta-commentary provided by the small off-screen audience huddled around the TV in my dorm room during the live finale.

After a day navigating the city in overpacked overheated dalladallas (public mini-vans) I returned to my dorm room to a buzz of excitement. The TV was already on and familiar commercials for Azam cola and Zantel cell phone banking greeted my entrance as Maureen said, “the finale is today!” I immediately knew what she was talking about. For the past month or so, we had dedicated a couple of hours every week to watching the new segment of Bongo Star Search, which airs on EATV. We watched Tanzanians in cities all over the country line up for miles to get their chance to compete for a cash prize and record deal given to the “best singer in Tanzania” as selected by popular SMS-text message. While the on-screen judges, entertainment business entrepreneur Rita Paulsen, record producer Master J and TV/Radio Presenter, and talk show personality Salama Jabir tore apart the auditions, Maureen, her friends, and I created our own “panel of judges” on Maureen’s bed.

The intro sequence played out and we huddled around the TV to decide the fate of the aspiring Bongo superstars.



*Frames from the opening sequence of Epiq Bongo Star Search foregrounding the microphone, the modern technology that will amplify “the best” Tanzanian voices. To watch the finale visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6JUJMmY066o>*

The finale opened on the Hollywood-style red carpet where Caesar, the male host who speaks almost exclusively Swahili on the show, interviewed the finalists and famous artists who passed by on their way into the studio. Almost all of the interviewees responded in Swahili following Caesar's lead, but one radio presenter responded entirely in English to the Swahili questions asked of her in spite of the fact that many of the Tanzanians watching at bars and kinyozis (barber shops) don't speak English. Within a few minutes, the cultural "mission" of the show was spelled out for viewers. The red carpet interviewees pointed to the amazing democratic opportunity the show was giving to Tanzanians "right off the street." Some even suggested, and the judges later echoed, that the Bongo Star would become an international superstar, an extraordinary claim when, to my knowledge, no Tanzanian has ever achieved international music fame. Inside the studio a flashy stage complete with a live band, light show, and fog machine was positioned in front of the panel of judges, a camera crew, and tables full of well-dressed Tanzanians.

Caesar handed the mike over to his female co-host and the introductions continued, this time in English. In her seamless American accent, Vee addressed her studio and TV audience: "Distinguished guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, boys and girls, and all you beautiful people, and you watching at home, welcome to the finale of Epiq Bongo Star Search. This is the night we've been waiting for and..." she rapidly switched into Swahili perhaps because of the apparent non-responsiveness of the audience "...*naomba wakaribishwe washiriki wetu jukwaani. Makofi kwa washiriki wetu* ('I ask that our contestants be welcomed to the stage. Applause for our contestants')." Confused by her American accent I blurted out,

"She sounds so American!"

Linda, my next-door neighbor, smiled at me proudly and responded to what she took as a compliment,

"Thank you for noticing, she has really nice English!"

Although I had not intended the compliment, I smiled back and said,

“Yeah, it’s impressive.”

Maureen then chimed in with her seemingly boundless knowledge of celebrities’ personal lives,

“She studied abroad in America.”

I smiled again,

“Cool.”

As the show continued however, the potential contradictions of speaking English on a show where many of the contestants and viewers are not English proficient came into play. When Vee, the American-English voice of Bongo Star Search addressed Judge Salama, who emulates the bad-cop persona of American Idol’s Simon Cowell, in English the judge immediately took the opportunity to comment on the linguistic “elephant in the room.” Vee’s code switching gave way to straight English when she said,

“How are you doin’ Salama?”

Judge Salama responded,

“Huh?”

Vee repeated, further inflecting her English with American slang,

“How’re you doin’ girl?”

Judge Salama responded in Swahili,

“*Wewe unasema? Sikuskii* (‘What did you say? I can’t hear you/I didn’t catch that.’)”

The audience on TV and in our dorm room laughed as Vee switched into Swahili to save face, but Judge Salama made sure to have the last English word with her final response, “Good to see you Vee.” Vee addressed the other two judges entirely in English without any further linguistic drama. Then she went back to her choreographed blend of English and Swahili for the general audience.

For the opening performance of the night, all of the finalists sang a passionate but heavily accented version of the international hit song “Lean on me.” The performance was met with mild applause and Vee commented:

*“Hii ilikuwa version tofauti na the original...but nzuri kweli; hongera kwa top ten again you guys are great man haha”*

Translation: “This was a different version from the original...but truly good; congratulations for the top ten again, you guys are great man haha.”



*Left: Hosts Caesar, who speaks almost exclusively Swahili, and V who speaks about half Swahili half American English, complete with slang.*

*Right: The final contestants, none of whom, judging from interviews etc., have a strong command of English.*

The contestants performed their repertoire, which was primarily in Swahili but also included a few English-language selections, and Maureen and her friends chatted away in Swahili only, occasionally pausing to translate for me. It was clear that this was *their* show, their comfort zone. However, after the competition was over and the winner, Wababa, walked away with cash prize and a record deal, Maureen asked me what I thought about the show. I said I



liked it. She responded, like Linda had earlier, not to what I said, but to what she thought I was thinking, “I know, we [Tanzania?] have a long way to go.”

Maureen’s closing comments on the show clearly spell out the aspiration to an “international” standard that was embedded in the use of English on the show. Moreover, her use of the inclusive pronoun “we” implies that this performative aspiration is collective and, if we take “we” to mean Tanzania, nation-wide. In keeping with this nationally inclusive aim, the framework of the TV show is explicitly participatory; Contestants are chosen in nationwide open auditions and the winners are chosen by popular text message vote. When this participatory framework meets with the performance of international-ness or cosmopolitan-ness, however, the reality of inequalities in access to international/cosmopolitan proficiencies emerge. The use of English in the speaking voices of the hosts and judges and in the singing voices of the contestants (but notably not their speaking voices) must be carefully orchestrated to make sure the Tanzanian audience members, many of whom do not speak English, do not feel alienated. Salama’s playful English-comprehension joke explicitly points out the inequalities in access to the international language that necessitate Vee and the judges’ choreographed code switching. Vee is problematic as a simultaneous means of vicarious aspiration and as a potentially marginalizing force for the many Tanzanians who don’t speak English, as Salama jokingly points out. Caesar, the male host who speaks almost exclusively Swahili, is a critical counterweight to the problematic code switching of Vee and the judges. He is clearly framed as a full participant, in spite of his deliberate failure to fashion himself as a cosmopolitan English speaker.

While the performance of English and Swahili *speaking* voices in Bongo Star Search remains highly dependent on actual linguistic proficiencies—no one who does not speak English is going to be shown speaking English—the performative “capture” of English was accomplished by way of *singing* voices. The finalists’ performance of “Lean on Me” reveals how musical embodiment of the English voice can be powerful tool for asserting inclusion in the English-speaking world without speaking English. This inclusion, however, is contingent on authenticity judgments; a performative attempt to “capture” the international language as a means of inclusion can quickly become grounds for exclusion if the authenticity of the captured voice is questioned. Vee’s awkward comment, “This was a different version from the original,” appears to be an attempt to distance herself from what she deems to be an inauthentic copy. Yet the inclusive norms of the Tanzanian show require her to diplomatically compliment the performers on a job well done in both Swahili and English, suppressing her defensive distancing impulse for the sake of participation. The problematic status of English voices as a source of both fantasy and marginalization is characteristic of the wider problem of global participation already outlined. Everyone on the show wants to fashion themselves as a cosmopolitan participant in a global televisual world, but the attempt to create a collective Tanzanian fantasy is situated in a minefield of linguistic inequality. The unequal access to language proficiencies required to craft “authentic” global voices makes the performance of these voices socially risky lest the English “haves” such as Vee and the judges exclude the English “have-nots” such as the contestants and many of the viewers.

## *Singing for Fredi*

In the first scenario I analyze, I was clearly peripheral to the dialogue. The girls chatted almost entirely in rapid Swahili only translating for me the few times they felt moved to do so. In the second scenario, however, I was plainly cast in a participatory role as a key musical and social player. Rather than Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley's metaphorical "shadow in the field"<sup>22</sup> I was more like an "elephant in the field," continuously asked for my opinions and my musical/artistic input. As any visibly white person who has lived in East Africa will tell you, it is literally impossible to pass through the streets unnoticed. The inevitable cat calls of "*Muzungu* ('foreigner' 'white person') how are you?!" are a constant reminder that you are surrounded by people who are hyper-aware of your otherness, and, as I have already pointed out, link it to your assumed ability to speak English.

All of my acquaintances had clearly already considered what it might mean for them to have a *muzungu* ('foreign') friend or, more often that not, a *muzungu* girlfriend, a fact that came into sharp relief on the several occasions I failed to meet preconceived expectations. My friend and musical collaborator Kataruga, a self described "bongo fusion" artist with a degree in music from the University of Dar es Salaam, seemed almost angry about the fact that I couldn't sight read the piano music he had studied in school, a collection of simple classical pieces and an arrangement of a "Backstreet Boys" song. In a parallel "let-down," Maureen appeared personally slighted when we watched WWE wrestling at her Mom's house and I made the mistake of saying that I didn't really watch the show and moreover, not many Americans I knew were "into it." These jarring reactions

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<sup>22</sup> Gregory Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, eds., *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

to my failure to have the musical abilities or the television preferences expected of me as a young American hints at the possibility that both Maureen and Kataruga's interests were structured on the imagined activities of "foreigners like me." Similarly, my brief career in the Bongo Flewa music industry was framed by preconceived expectations about my "foreign" musical self and the ways it could enter into Tanzanian popular music. Luckily, my performance of the imagined "foreign" voice satisfied expectations. This is an interesting reversal of the first situation. Instead of an attempt to frame "Tanzanian" voices as internationally relevant, my collaboration with G-SOLO was an attempt to frame my "foreign" voice as relevant to Tanzanian social worlds.

I first met G-SOLO in person at the Daruso bar, a popular hangout for University of Dar es Salaam professors and students, in the late afternoon. He was sitting in the corner of the bar, speakers in hand when I walked in. He ordered water for me and soda for him and, as we began to talk, some of our preconceived ideas about each other gave way to reality; I was not, as G had inferred from my Swahili text messages, completely conversant in Swahili and he was not, as I had suspected, a 19-year-old aspiring Hip Hop artist. G-SOLO was in his thirties and had been involved in the Bongo Flewa music business as a rapper and co-owner of music studio Kama Kawa Records since 2006. He began our conversation with a canonical Bongo Flewa story of his musical beginnings—how his father left and he struggled to support himself and his mother doing carpentry work until he heard rap music for the first time and his destiny changed. When I started asking questions he simply handed me his 148 page Swahili-language book "*Harakati za Bongo Flewa na Mapinduzi* ('The Bongo Flewa Movement and Revolution')"

and smiling, told me to read it. Then the topic of conversation shifted to me.

When G-SOLO asked me about my musical experience I struggled for words. My typical answer to this question, complete with genre labels like “Bluegrass,” “Americana,” or “Irish music” would likely not translate to his social world. I started trying to describe my musical development but G quickly cut me off.

“Kataruga says you have a beautiful voice, can you sing R&B?”

I laughed seeing as I had never thought of considering myself an R&B singer before.

“I guess, I sing jazz...”

I stammered. He further pursued the question.

“So like Alicia Keys, can you sing one of her songs?”

I laughed again at the obvious projection of my musical identity, but sang a section of Alicia Keys’ “Falling.” G-SOLO was convinced and excitedly began to tell me about the songs we would write together. He pulled out a USB flash drive, plugged it into the speakers which he fondly referred to as his “ghetto blasters,” and played me the beat for the song “Fredri” (Track 3). He rapped through the verses, narrating the tragic suicide of his friend from Dodoma. I strained to catch all of the words but after he finished rapping he paraphrased for me in English. Fredri, he told me, had killed himself after he found out that his wife Vicky was cheating on him. He, in all seriousness, claimed that Vicky was a vampire, drawing a fascinating connection between the bloodsucking capitalists from *mumaini* stories (see page 31 of this thesis) and the modern *vicheche* (slang term for someone who cheats on their boyfriends/girlfriends). For our second collaboration track G-SOLO suggested a less personal topic. The song “*msikate tamaa* (‘don’t lose hope’)” would be dedicated to orphans and street children all over the world. I transferred the pre-made beats to my computer and spent the next week listening and trying to write “hooks” for the refrain section of each song.

A week later, I found myself in a “hole in the wall” music studio “Eke production” surrounded by curious Tanzanians. I spent an hour sitting with a group of young men casually slipping a Swahili comment into their conversation whenever possible in a relatively successful attempt to get “street cred.” When the gospel singer who was using the studio finally finished doubling his harmony vocals G-SOLO and I went in to record our track. I went into the recording booth and recorded the chorus that I wrote for *msikate tamaa*;

*Everyday, the children wake to silence dreaming of the ones they've never known,  
Waiting on somebody, to call them home,  
But baby when the darkness falls, listen for my voice that calls,  
My sister my brother, you will grow stronger hold on a little longer.*

My impulses as a folk singer-songwriter made me cringe at generic lyrics, but the response from the Tanzanian producers and artist on the other side of the booth was universal awe. G-SOLO said “I think I love you” and the others repeatedly said “*wewe ni noma!!* (lit. ‘You are bad’ but meaning ‘you are spectacular).” It was not my lyrical genius that excited them, but rather my *voice*. Word travelled quickly around the studio that an American R&B singer was in the building and the studio become noticeably more crowded as I added the finishing touches. Eke, the owner of Eke studios, and G-SOLO sent me back into the recording booth to add the musical touches that they clearly expected me, as an R&B singer, to be able to do. Aided by years of experience singing in bluegrass bands and recording Irish music, I doubled my main track, added the harmony vocals, and then recorded improvised vocal lines that ironically reinforced my authenticity as a bearer of the R&B “tradition” in the ears of my Tanzanian listeners. Not once was this authenticity questioned. I never heard G-SOLO’s part to this song, so I’m not sure how the track became audibly Tanzanian, but in our next collaborative project, “Freda,” my voice itself became a site for negotiating overlapping Tanzanian and international identities.

I tried to write a chorus for “Fredri” but I found myself completely at a loss for words to describe the tragic story, so G-SOLO, his friend (I’ll call him “John”), and I met at the University to write together. We sat down under a tree, blasted the beat from G-SOLO’s not-so-trusty “ghetto blaster” speakers, and started to play with musical phrases. John, who had known Fredi personally, looked at me seriously and said, “You have to sing in Swahili.” He looked at G-SOLO and reiterated “*anahitaji kuimba kwa kiswahili* (‘she has to sing in Swahili’).” We all agreed and got to work. I sang a melody, John repeated it, and then he set Swahili words to the melody I had created;

*Stori ya kusikitisha kifo chenye utata,  
Mapenzi alimchanganya akajitoa sadaka,  
Wivu wa kimapenzi Fredi akajimada,  
Umeondoka duniani ndugu wanakutaka.*

*A sad story a death full of confusion,  
Love made him crazy he paid a sacrifice,  
For the jealousy of love Fredi killed himself,  
You have departed this world your  
relatives/friends need you.*

I wrote down the lyrics and tried my hardest to spit all the syllables in time but my non-native tongue stumbled over the words and I noticed a hint of anxiety in G and John’s faces. I promised to practice it and they reluctantly gave me the benefit of the doubt. Then John suggested I write some English in too, and handed over the creative reins. I sang,

*Fredi we’re still praying for you,  
Fredri we’ll be missing you,  
Fredri tuko pamoja nawe,  
Hear what I say,  
Kwa mungu wa milele.*

*Fredi we’re still praying for you,  
Fredri we’ll be missing you,  
Fredri we are with you,  
Hear what I say,  
With God forever*

(To listen, play track 4)

We went back to Eke productions a couple of days later and I recorded the hook in the same R&B format; doubled base track, then doubled harmonies, then ad lib vocals. With coaching from the other room, I mastered the Swahili tongue twister. Then G-SOLO effortlessly spit his Swahili verses. I thought we were all done when G casually asked me to “just go and record the intro.” I didn’t understand what he meant. He demonstrated, putting on a voice evocative of American Hip Hop, “This song is dedicated to Fredi. Fiona, G-SOLO, Eke productions, you know?” I tried to get out of the task, explaining that I had no idea how to do a Hip Hop intro, that that particular American “voice” was not part of my repertoire, but G insisted, convinced that my American voice would naturally produce the Hip Hop intro sound. So, with moral support from the control booth, I recorded the intro over and over again until I mastered the Hip Hop voice that was expected of me.



*Someone took this photo of the crew hard-at-work while filming the music video for “Fredi” on the University of Dar es Salaam campus. Rapper G-SOLO is second from the Left.*



It is remarkable how quickly I “became” a Bongo Flewa artist. As any ethnomusicologist who has studied North Indian Classical music, North African Andalusí music, or Arabic music can tell you, full acceptance as an “authentic” performer of a musical tradition is often difficult to come by and may require the development of any number of new social and musical proficiencies. In contrast, I was accepted almost immediately “as I am”—or perhaps as I was imagined—by G-SOLO and most of my Bongo Flewa acquaintances. My intermediate level Swahili certainly eased my way as I negotiated the social situations where my authenticity was questioned, usually by way of rapid-fire Swahili greetings or questions. I was often addressed in English, however, to ease my participation and allow my Tanzanian friends to exercise their English skills.

Musically, I was bewildered by the amount of artistic freedom that was granted to me; I was completely entrusted to write English lyrics and constantly asked for my musical opinion. G-SOLO even repeatedly asked whether we could record one of my songs in the studio and then flavor it with some Swahili rap. We might expect that the fully “localized” Bongo Flewa Alex Perullo argues for in his book would be resistant to so easily incorporating a foreigner’s musical input and artistic opinions. As my collaborative songwriting with John and G reveals, however, my artistic freedom was not without borders. In John’s opinion and, he conjectured, the opinion of the Tanzanian public, I would “have to sing in Swahili.” While my R&B and Hip Hop voices sounded the global that I was automatically expected to authentically represent, my diligently rehearsed Swahili syllables sounded the Tanzanian flavor necessary to round out my Bongo Flewa authenticity.

## ***Part IV: Conclusions***

### ***“Capturing” the Voices of Others***

In Tanzania, and indeed, in every social world that I’ve been a part of, mimicking the voices of others is an extremely popular activity. Our essentialized notions of vocal authenticity linking certain voices to certain social groups or even particular people allow us to produce often hilarious ironies by assuming others’ voices. Examples abound: at William and Mary we imitate President Taylor Reveley’s distinctive voice, in my hometown of Charlottesville, Virginia my friends and I shamelessly mimic the Southern accents that surround us, and countless comedians do “impressions” of the “accents” of the world to inspire applause and laughter. In Tanzania, American accents copied from TV shows, movies and music are constantly mimicked in singing and speaking voices. On any given night out clubbing in Dar es Salaam, you will find crowds of Tanzanians rapping and singing the latest American raps and R&B hooks word-for-word. Maureen and her best friends Maria and Rabia even preemptively adopted Hip-Hop-inspired American accents and slang every time we fixed our hair, makeup, and outfits to go out to the clubs.

The imitative activities I have just described are undertaken in a playful spirit and often accompanied by drinking and “joking around,” but what happens, we must ask, when these voices are assumed without irony or comedy? With this

idea we can return, yet again, to the graffiti artist who stated “*BONG FLAVAR IS STTIL ALIVE, HIP HOP IS DEAD!!!*” or the daladala driver who wrote “Happy people” on his car and take them seriously. The serious attempt to map “foreign” voices onto Tanzanian bodies is central to neoliberal popular culture in Dar es Salaam. Indeed this creative transgression of ideas that link authentic voices to their “places of origin” is what has allowed rap to become Tanzanian. This musical appropriation affectively reorganizes categorical understandings that link certain voices to certain cultural groups and instead asserts a type of inclusivity that Alastair Pennycook and Tony Mitchell call the “global locatedness of Hip Hop”:

The global locatedness of Hip Hop demands that we rethink time and space, and adopt what Mignolo (2000) refers to as a historiography that ‘spatializes time and avoids narratives of transition, progress, development, and point of arrivals’ (p. 205). If we can allow for ‘multiple, heterogeneous, and uneven temporalities and histories that the dominant historical narrative, often presenting itself as singular and linear, suppresses’ (Inoue, 2004, p. 2), it becomes possible conceptually to question the linearity at the heart of modernist narratives about origins” (Pennycook 2009: 40).

It is this “global locatedness” of the imagined Hip Hop community that allows Palestinian rappers of DAM Palestine to make the statement “We are the black people of the middle East” or MBY, a Tanzanian rapper featured in the opening of Netherlandian Maikel Schnerr’s internet published documentary *Real Hip Hop is from Afirca* [Sic.], to declare without a hint of comedy “You know what? I want to

tell the world that Hip Hop is really coming from Africa. Africa's the real Hip Hop land aight? Americans sometimes are trying to copy our styles, trying to buy our music, **cultural** music, and right now, like me MBY I gonna do **cultural Hip Hop music**. Yeah man. *Full*.<sup>23</sup> (<http://vimeo.com/27236798>).

This delicious paradox of a rapper using African-American vernacular inflected English to speak the words “Americans sometimes are trying to copy our styles” goes to the heart of the questions of this paper. How can music produce the voice? How can imagined musical lineages mobilize new forms of speaking and singing and enable novel global subjectivities? Yet even as Bongo Fleva produces “globally located” voices and subjectivities through these “captured voices,” we must be careful not to overstate the transformative power of these sonically reimagined worlds. The “characteristic contradiction of the neoliberal moment” that Weiss identifies (Weiss 2009: 175) compels us to also consider the sense of exclusion or marginalization that goes hand in hand with global subjectivities in the poor nations of the world. This contradiction surfaces when imaginative assertions of equality with global others are grounded in lived experiences of difference. The worldwide “leakage” of musical sounds through new media and technology provides an unprecedented opportunity to assert inclusion in reverse, by assuming the “authentic” voice of a community from afar. However, unequal access in the proficiencies required to craft voices that will be heard as globally authentic is problematic in this regard. As we saw in the Bongo Star Search finalists’ performance of “Lean on Me,” for example, differences in English proficiency can

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<sup>23</sup> Boldface for emphasis. The word “full” is popularly used in Tanzanian street slang to mean something along the lines of “good.”

render Tanzanian impressions of international voices illustrative of the difference that they attempt to erase. On the other hand, the ways that Tanzanians experience their *difference* from global others, for example by speaking Swahili and not English, are also essential to cultural productions of identity. The incorporation of my “foreign” voice into the Bongo Fleva song “Freda,” for example, necessitated a convincing vocal performance of Tanzanian-ness located in the *lugha ya taifa* (‘national language’) Swahili. The performative capture of the voices of others is a risky but powerful way to question difference simply because the linking of voice to authenticity is itself a powerful way that difference is constructed.

### ***We are the world? Confronting Global Inequality***

Any analysis of the global imagination must take into account the material inequalities that structure relations between “global citizens.” My thinking on this topic is heavily influenced by the work of James Ferguson, who problematizes the intensely localized anthropological study of Africa in his book *Global Shadows*. He worries that by avoiding the admittedly arbitrary category of Africa and assuming all “modernities” are created equal, anthropologists may ignore the socioeconomic disparities that underlie African discourse on development and modernity. As he eloquently explains it,

[...] in Africa, modernity has always been a matter not simply of past and present, but also of up and down. The aspiration to modernity has been an aspiration to rise in the world in economic and political terms; to improve one’s way of life, one’s standing, one’s place-in-the-

world. Modernity has thus been a way of talking about global inequality and about material needs and how they might be met (Ferguson: 32) [...] In their eagerness to treat African people as (cultural) equals, Western anthropologists have sometimes too easily sidestepped the harder discussion about the economic inequalities and disillusionments that threaten to make any such equality a merely ideal or sentimental one (Ferguson 2006: 34).

My ethnographic analysis attempts to foreground the dual understanding of the “modern” that, as Ferguson explains, characterizes contemporary African discourse and cultural practice. Instead of explaining away Bongo Flewa’s entanglement with modern self-fashioning by describing it as an entirely *localized* form of Hip Hop, my analysis foregrounds the modern aspirations that my informants often expressed. As Ferguson suggests, discussions that negotiate the traditional-ness or modern-ness of cultural products may voice aspirations to “such primary ‘modern’ goods as improved housing, health care and education” (Ferguson 2006: 32). The tendency to ignore the direct copying of cultural elements that are considered “modern”—the televisual medium, the rapping voice, or the English language, for example—in the search for a purely local meaning may obscure meaningful aspirations to global equality.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that these “aspirations” insert themselves into the social world without confronting the ideological inheritance of the past. In the talk about music and in the performance of music itself in neoliberal Tanzania, desires to “rise above” and improve place-in-the-(conspicuously unequal) world meet deeply-rooted moral critiques of inequality itself and the economic activities

that support it. Although Nyerere's Ujamaa policies ultimately failed to provide economically for the *wananchi*, its "modern revoicing" of moralizing discourse concerning the policing of exploitation is more relevant than ever in the neoliberal era as disparities of wealth grow between former members of the "Ujamaa" family. The "inclusive exclusion" that characterizes many Tanzanians' experience of neoliberal changes engenders a sense of nationwide "exploitation" that itself is a critical locus of authenticity in Bongo Fleva music as popular artists seek to represent Tanzania. Thus as the shifting voices of Tanzanian popular music incorporate "global" or "modern" elements they also critically consider the stakes of fashioning themselves as citizens of the world. Do these transnational aspirations distance Tanzanians from their local realities? English, like other cultural elements associated with unequally distributed global power, lives a multivalent symbolic life in Bongo Fleva as both a means of collective Tanzanian aspiration and a dangerous means to exclude and exploit one's fellow Tanzanians.

## ***Epilogue: Mselas Vs. Sharobaros***

So far we have seen the contradictions of neoliberal Tanzania as they are voiced in the language aesthetics of speaking, singing, and rapping Tanzanian voices. For the last section of my paper, I would like to move away from language specifically to make a broader point about the politics of imitating global others in general. The musical genre Bongo Fleva is tirelessly self-referential and has even given birth to a host of terms that describe a holistic way of inhabiting a Bongo

Flavored world. A person from from *Bongo* (Dar es Salaam) or *Bongo-land* (Tanzania as a whole) can describe themselves as an *mbongo* (person of Dar es Salaam/Tanzania), speak *kibongo* (Dar es Salaam slang, also called *lugha ya mitaani* ‘the language of the streets’), and listen to *Bongo Flewa* music. In addition to these terms for self-fashioning, Bongo Flewa music has also generated the more specific characters of the *msela* and, more recently, the morally ambiguous *sharobaro*. The public debate over the desirability and authenticity of these characters summarizes the endemic problem of participation embedded in the performance of the global.

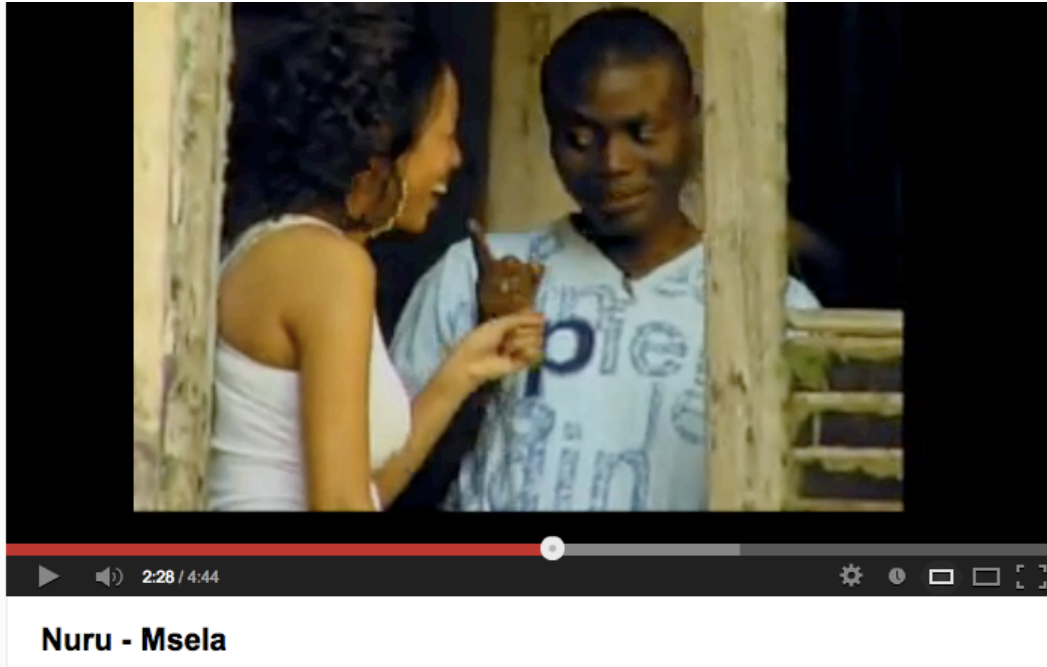
The term “Msela,” used to describe a morally respectable but poor youth, emerged with the Bongo Flewa genre itself. The term was popularized in the early 90s in the first rap song ever recorded in Tanzania, Othman Njaidi’s “Msela” (Track 5). Perullo explains the original meaning and continued relevance of the social referent in his article “Here’s a Little Something Local”:

Njaidi describes *wasela* as poor youth who rise above their problems without getting involved in drugs or crime. This image of *wasela* as honorable youth who suffer due to the environment they live in, not their own ineptitude or waywardness, conveyed a powerful message in the early 1990s. The chorus, sung by the female singer Pamela, added an allure to the status of *msela*. She sings, ‘I love *msela*/Even if he has no money’ (Perullo 2007: 262).

Among my Tanzanian acquaintances, *msela* was often used as a familiar term of address for their peers and a slang term for “boyfriend.” In a clear continuity from the popular Ujamaa logic of the past, being fashioned as the “exploited” in contrast



to the “exploiter” is a critical criterion for social belonging and respect. The rapping voice of the musically-Hip-Hop-fashioned *msela* is equally critical to his relevance as an active participant in neoliberal popular culture.

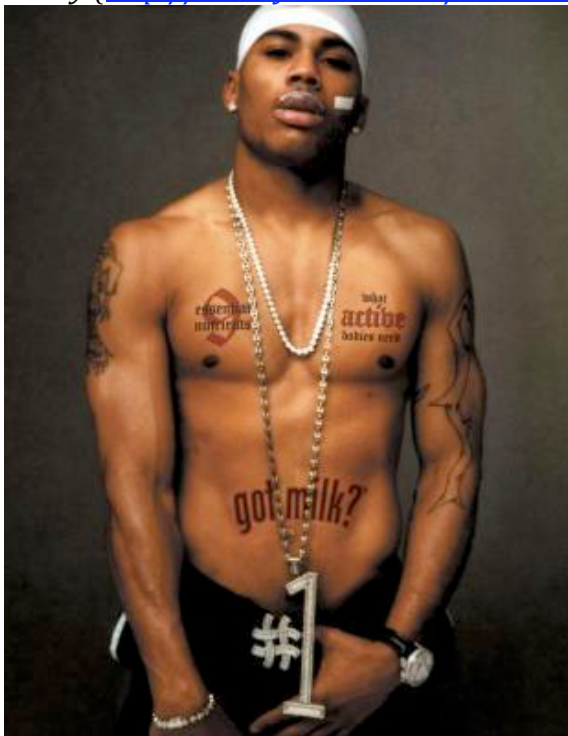


*Bongo Fleva singer Nuru is courted by her charming Msela in the music video for her 2008 song “Msela” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yS2NiLiDX4M>)*

The term Sharobaro, in contrast, originates from the comic persona of “Sharobaro Milionea.” His ridiculous attempts to “act American” are encoded in his heavy sampling of Hip Hop slang terms, his carefully manicured hair, his nice clothing, his exaggerated “limping” walk reminiscent of American gangsta “swag,” and, last but not least, his Nelly-inspired face tape. Sharobaro Milionea’s songs such as “*Najua Kuhesabu Namba* (‘I know how to count numbers’)” (Track 6) are comically devoid of social significance.



Sharobaro Milionea and his comedy partner King Majuto in a commercial for Airtel Money (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKb45yApMKU>).



American rapper Nelly in a “got milk?” commercial, do you see the resemblance?

In spite of his comic beginnings, however, the *sharobaro* character has become a serious object of desire for many Tanzanians. In the wake of Sharobaro Milionea’s untimely death in December, 2012 a new “sharobaro” emerged as the leader of the “movement.” Bob Junior a.k.a. Mr. Chocolate Flavor a.k.a. *Rais wa*

*masharobaro* ('president of the Sharobaros') a.k.a. Sharobaro President is a fully fledged Bongo Fleva icon whose impeccable clothing, hip dance moves, and luxurious lifestyle are showcased in music videos documenting his relationships with beautiful Tanzanian women (Track 7). His imitative practices have been reframed as authentic and demand to be taken seriously.

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*Bob Junior a.k.a. Mr. Chocolate Flavor a.k.a. Rais wa masharobaro* ('president of the Sharobaros') a.k.a. Sharobaro President in an advertisement for a Bongo Fleva show in Dar es Salaam.

In spite of Bob Junior's popularity and obvious material success, the *sharobaro*, unlike the *msela* who is practically universally adored, remains a suspicious character. I did not meet anyone in Dar es Salaam who described himself as a *sharobaro*. Moreover my friend Labara and his little brother who migrated to Dar es Salaam from a small Maasai village in Manyara seemed to think of the term as an insult. When I went to visit them for English lessons, we would pass around a pair of sunglasses and playfully tell the wearer "*wewe ni sharobaro* ('you are a sharobaro')." Labara and his brother jokingly enacted their sharobaro personalities while wearing the sunglasses but invariably would take them off and say "*Hapana, mimi ni msela* ('No, I'm an msela')." Labara's 10-year-old brother would sometimes refuse to put on the sunglasses all together, defiantly denying to so much as *pretend* to be a *sharobaro*. Labara and his brother's rejection of the sharobaro label has been echoed in Bongo Flewa songs such as Momba's "*Mi Sio Sharobaro* (I'm not a sharobaro)" (Track 8) that mourn the singer's inability to get the girl he wants because he doesn't have can't afford the appurtenances of a *sharobaro*. The debated desirability of the sharobaro reveals the way that imaginative aspirations to global elites are continually grounded in the realities of global inequality and sometimes moralized accordingly. Could it be that the sharobaro's consumerist self-fashioning is an attempt to gain the fruits of neoliberalism at the expense of the many Tanzanians who can't afford nice clothes and expensive hairstyles?



*Labara and me posing like “gangsters”*

Within the past ten years, the genre of Bongo Flewa has itself come under attack for its commercialization. The widespread perception that *sharobaros* have taken over the music industry has created a schism. Just as many Tanzanians reject the label *sharobaro*, many Tanzanian rappers now reject the genre label Bongo Flewa and instead call their music Swahili or, if they are from the Maasai ethnic group, Maasai Hip Hop. This schism in Tanzanian popular music powerfully demonstrates how increasing material inequalities between members of the former *Ujamaa* family create conflicting logics of authenticity in appropriation. In contemporary Tanzanian, the *sharobaros* of Tanzania’s first all-English-language Bongo Flewa group Pah 1 rap,

*I wanna get paid,  
I wanna get paid,  
I wanna get paid and get myself a new whip.*

*I wanna get paid,*

*I wanna get paid,  
I wanna get paid and get myself a new ride.*

(Track 9)

From another corner of Dar es Salaam, the *wasela* on the *Uwazi* ('clarity/transparency') mixtape I downloaded from [www.swahilioriginaltz.com](http://www.swahilioriginaltz.com) rap in noticeably accented English,

*Fuck you Bongo Flewa go to hell,  
Go to jail and ring like a bell,  
Muthafucka you ain't got nothing to tell...*

(Track 10)

On another track, "*Mi sio superstar* ('I'm not a superstar')," the *Uwazi* mixtape rappers clearly spell out the difference that the members of *Pah 1* perhaps seek to erase with their aesthetic, linguistic, and lyrical imitation of an internationally popular rap:

*Mi sio supastar  
Kwani mi ni R. Kelly?  
Mi sio supastar  
Kwani mi ni Jim Carrey?  
Mi sio supastar  
Kwani mi ni R. Kelly?  
Mi sio supa supasupastar.*

I'm not a superstar  
Am I R. Kelly or something?  
I'm not a superstar  
Am I Jim Carrey or something?  
I'm not a superstar  
Am I R. Kelly or something?  
I'm not a super supersuperstar

(Track 11)

While the *sharobaros* performatively *erase* the material differences between Tanzanians and global elites, the *mselas* access the rapping voice and the English language to *highlight* their material difference from global elites. The *sharobaro's* transformation from a comic figure to an icon of popular culture reveals that his performance of material equality with

the worlds' privileged is increasingly viewed as *authentic*. Although this new way of being Tanzanian is still viewed as morally suspect by some, images of *sharobaros* have come to dominate popular music videos. I wonder what would happen if Labara kept the sunglasses on and made the statement "Mimi ni sharobaro ('I am a sharobaro')" without a hint of irony.



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